

TITLE

How Crucial was the role of the RAF to the Dunkirk Evacuation of May 1940?

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DATE DEPOSITED

14 February 2024

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How Crucial was the RAF to the Dunkirk Evacuation of May 1940?

Thesis submitted by:

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For the award of Master of Philosophy

Institute of Theology and Liberal Arts

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Resubmitted January 2024

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How crucial was the RAF to the Dunkirk Evacuation of May 1940?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Supervisors Dr Mark Donnelly and Dr Stewart McCain for the support they have given me during my studies. In particular, the feedback on Chapter drafts I sent them and always being on hand to answer any questions that I had proved to be invaluable.

I would also like to thank my Study Support Tutor Victoria Rowe, whose help with writing and planning techniques for my work was also invaluable.

My thanks also go to the staff of the National Archives, British Library and Imperial War Museum. All three places were visited for my research and the resources that I used helped to steer my project in the right direction.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends, in particular my parents, for supporting me throughout.

How crucial was the RAF to the Dunkirk Evacuation of May 1940?

Abstract

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Operation Dynamo was the codename for an evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk, Northern France, from 27 May to 4 June 1940, after the defeat of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France and Belgium. There were several components of evacuation; the Royal Navy, the flotilla of civilian vessels known as the Little Ships of Dunkirk and the Royal Air Force (RAF). It is the latter of these components that is the focus of this thesis. This is because the RAF does not seem to have had the same level of acknowledgement that the Navy and the Little Ships of Dunkirk have gained, even though the RAF was given a task that was just as vital as rescuing troops; defending the evacuation from enemy forces. The thesis aims to assess just how crucial the role of the RAF was for Operation Dynamo being the arguable success it became. It is intended to use the Myth of 1940 as a framing device, this was the myth that 'Britain stood alone' during this year and key events were more successful than they really were. Chapter One looks at the events before, during and after Operation Dynamo and assessing the extent to how it was a successful operation. Chapter Two focuses on criticisms that the RAF received at Dunkirk, why these criticisms came about and how it could have led to the RAF not receiving much recognition. Chapter Three assesses the role that the RAF played at Dunkirk and the Battle of France before and after Dunkirk, as well as being the chapter that answers the thesis' research question. Chapter Four focuses on the Battle of Britain from July 1940 to October 1940, looking at the role that the RAF played during this event and how events at Dunkirk led to the Battle of Britain being a victory for the Allies. A wide range of resources, ranging from numerous works by different authors to official documents relating to the key topics kept at research institutes, have been used throughout to help me to answer my research question.

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WORD COUNT: 59,671

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Introduction

A turning point of the Second World War in Western Europe occurred on 10 May 1940. This day saw the German armed forces launch their 'Blitzkrieg'; a swift invasion of north-west Europe, which saw Luxembourg, Netherlands, Belgium and France invaded in quick succession and the Allies caught off-guard. From the declaration of the war in September 1939 until the launch of Blitzkrieg, there was comparatively little conflict between Anglo-French forces and Germany. The British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) were deployed to France in September 1939, to defend against any potential attacks, where they were supported by the French and Belgian Armies. This phase of the war would become known as 'The Phoney War', given the minimal amount of fighting on both sides of the conflict, with both sides of the conflict being at what could be considered a stalemate compared to what came later. This resulted in the Allies being caught off-guard when the Blitzkrieg launched. Such was the ferocity and swiftness of this attack that it forced the BEF to retreat to northern France. All the while, the German armed forces continued their relentless assault, pursuing the BEF until they eventually had them cornered. It was here the situation came to a head, as the German forces continued to attack BEF and French troops at the remaining strongholds. This culminated in the Battle of Boulogne from 22 May to 25 May 1940 and the Battle of Calais from 23 May to 26 May 1940, which saw British and French troops fend off the German forces in a last stand. Both battles ended in defeat for the Allies and saw Boulogne and Calais taken by Germany. By now, there was only one Allied stronghold left: the coastal town of Dunkirk.

In the days following the commencement of Blitzkrieg, plans to evacuate BEF and Allied troops from the port and beaches of Dunkirk were drawn up by the War Office. These plans were formed on 20 May 1940, which is an indication of just how dire the situation was for the Allies. This evacuation, codenamed 'Operation Dynamo', commenced on the evening of 26 May 1940 and finished on 4 June 1940. Due to how hopeless the situation appeared it was estimated that approximately 30,000 troops could be evacuated. However, the overall amount ended up being approximately 338,000. It is this outcome that has led to the commonplace assertion that Dunkirk represented a success emerging from a catastrophic military defeat. Despite this remarkable achievement, the 'triumphs' of Dunkirk have been over-emphasised over

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the years through ‘the myth of 1940’; a myth of how Britain ‘stood alone’ during the Dunkirk evacuation and the Battle of Britain later in 1940 and triumphed over the invading German forces. This misconception became a common narrative for both events. This was particularly the case for Dunkirk as determined efforts by the Ministry of Information and the Press to portray Dunkirk as a ‘triumphant victory’, made Operation Dynamo become remembered as more of a success than the product of a failure. Though Dynamo largely achieved what it set out to accomplish, it was still the result of a defeat, one that was catastrophic for the Allies, something which appears to have been overshadowed. Furthermore, to the author’s mind, the role of the RAF could have become comparatively obscured by mythology focusing on the core elements of Dunkirk, the bravery of the BEF troops and the determination of the Little Ships flotilla to do their bit. The ‘myth of 1940’ is to be the main framing device for this thesis, examining how mythology has the power to shape narratives and obscure certain components of events by only focusing on certain aspects which is what happened with the Dunkirk Evacuation.

The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force played crucial roles during the evacuation. The Navy was tasked with directly rescuing troops, while the RAF protected the skies. The Navy also received help from an unlikely source; a flotilla of vessels manned by brave civilians, determined to help with the rescue efforts. These ranged from fishing boats and personal yachts to paddle steamers and ferries. This extraordinary component is also another reason why the Dunkirk evacuation has come to be viewed as such an iconic event of the Second World War. Furthermore, it is the role of the Little Ships of Dunkirk and, although not viewed in such an iconic light, the Royal Navy that appear to be the most remembered and more widely acknowledged components of the evacuation. This is likely the case because both these components were directly involved in rescuing the troops, while the RAF, despite their crucial task of providing defence, were comparatively less visible.

What has made their actions particularly remarkable is the short amount of time they would have had to assemble a sufficient evacuation fleet, as John Masefield argues:

‘In war it is not easy to telephone to hire shipping... every ship that can swim is in use in important national service; every boat is precious and every lifeboat round the coast is on duty... every small coastwise vessel is

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on duty that cannot be interrupted without danger... to gather a great number of ships in a hurry, to man them, equip them with instruments, charts, food, water, fuel weapons and ammunition is most difficult'¹

A component of the evacuation that is equally acknowledged is the resilience and bravery of the troops that were trapped on the beaches. Despite the German armed forces being on their tail and numerous enemy bombardments, they put on a brave and calm face as they awaited their rescue, despite the dire situation they were in. There are numerous accounts of their bravery as they awaited rescue. One such example is this recollection by Signaller Alfred Baldwin; 'you had the impression of people standing waiting for a bus. There was no pushing or shoving'². Another similar testimony from Captain Humphrey Bredin of the Royal Ulster Rifles 2nd Battalion is even more remarkable:

'You saw the most extraordinary sights. Little groups of British soldiers sitting on the sand as though they were at a holiday resort, playing cards while Messerschmitts [aircraft used by Luftwaffe] flew up and down. You could see the bullets hitting the sand and these soldiers were saying 'he can't shoot very straight!' when the bullets had missed them by a few yards'³

Newspapers at the time also went out of their way to portray the retreat and evacuation of troops as positively as possible, heavily focusing on the positive outcomes of the evacuation, examples of which can be found in Chapters One and Two. Walter Lord also argues 'it is customary to look on Dunkirk as a series of days. Actually, it should be regarded as a series of crises. Each crisis was solved, only to be replaced by another, with the pattern repeated and again. It was the collective refusal of men to be discouraged by this relentless sequence that is important.'⁴

While these factors will be spoken about further, the evacuation component this thesis will focus on is the role of the RAF at Dunkirk. While the RAF's role at Dunkirk has

¹ John Masefield, *The Nine Day Wonder* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1941), 91.

² Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of France*, (London: Ebury Press, 2010), 197.

³ *Ibid*, 198.

⁴ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk: The True Story of Operation Dynamo* (New York: Open Road Media, 2012), 9.

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not been disputed, they do not appear to have been as widely acknowledged or received the same iconic status as the Little Ships of Dunkirk, the resilience of stranded troops or even the Royal Navy. This seems to be the case as these components, particularly the former two, are acknowledged the most in official histories of the evacuation. While this thesis does not intend to downplay their roles in any way, being the evacuation's most iconic components does not necessarily mean that they are also the most important. As stated earlier on, mythology can easily shape narratives of events by only focusing on several aspects. It is through mythology that the little ships became as iconic as they have, becoming the core element of the 'narrative' along with the BEF's resilience while stranded at Dunkirk. Also stated earlier were how certain aspects of an event can end up being obscured because of mythology, which happened with the RAF at Dunkirk, which was given a minor role within the 'narrative' formed by myth. Examining these points will also be crucial to the thesis, as a key point will be examining how this 'narrative' took hold and gave the RAF a small part, despite having a role that was important and could have been the most crucial to Dynamo achieving its aims.

While the Navy and Little Ships were the rescuers of the evacuation operation, they would also come under attack from the Luftwaffe on a regular basis. As the RAF was tasked with defending the evacuation from enemy interference, this would have meant that they fought against and protected the evacuation from the Luftwaffe, therefore it is likely they would have reduced the number of attacks on the evacuation. It is another aim of this thesis to assess this in detail, as well as to explore how the Luftwaffe would have been the most significant threat the evacuation faced. Overall, it is my intention to use all of these to answer what will be the key question of this thesis; 'how significant was the role of the RAF at Dunkirk?'

Prior to delving into the RAF's performance at Dunkirk, within the thesis will also be studying the extent to which Dunkirk can be viewed as a success that occurred during a military defeat. This has been the source of much discussion over the years from different people. These include Prime Minister Winston Churchill who famously noted 'we must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory,

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wars are not won by evacuations.’⁵ Numerous historians have also been part of the debate. Several have argued that it was not a victory as such, including John Harris who argues that ‘victory could not be made from 390,000 casualties, 68,110 of them British, or the loss of 1,000 guns and the transport, ammunition, stores and petrol for a whole army.’⁶ Meanwhile, numerous writers have also argued that Dunkirk can be regarded as a victory, including Julian Thompson who has argued ‘the truth was that Hitler had failed to prevent the BEF from escaping, it would prove a catastrophic error.’⁷ It is intended to assess whether Dunkirk could be seen as more of a success or a defeat, doing so by examining how myth has turned Dunkirk into a ‘triumphant victory’ for the Allies, despite being the product of a military defeat, which appears to have dominated the popular memory of Dunkirk. What will also be touched upon is how Dunkirk could have paved the way for further victories, as implied by Julian Thompson’s argument. Furthermore, assessing this debate could help to provide an answer to the key research question, as it is likely the RAF could have contributed to whether Dunkirk can be considered a successful mission or not. This is because of how the RAF was tasked with protecting the evacuation from the German Luftwaffe, who were a significant threat to the evacuation, as this thesis will explore, their actions are likely to have made a big difference as to the outcome of the Dunkirk evacuation.

This thesis will also explore the criticisms that the RAF faced after Dunkirk. Many troops at Dunkirk reported that they did not see any RAF aircraft at Dunkirk, which led to many of them being very critical, or in some cases downright hostile, towards the RAF, feeling that they had been let down and abandoned. It is an intention to explore such criticisms as well as reasons why these could have come about. As the second chapter shall detail, there were indeed mitigating factors that prevented frequent RAF activity. For example, many RAF aircraft were unable to spend lengthy amounts of time in the air, despite the RAF mainly using air bases in Kent (including Manston, Hawkinge and Detling to name a few⁸), due to having a limited fuel capacity.

⁵ Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 86.

⁶ John Harris, *Dunkirk: The Story of History’s Most Extraordinary Rescue* (London: Canelo History Publishing, 2021), 176.

⁷ John Grehan, *Dunkirk: Nine Days that Saved an Army* (Barnsley: Frontline Books), 291.

⁸ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 33.

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Furthermore, there are reports of significant cloud cover at Dunkirk as well as smoke from burning wreckages that, both of which would have made visibility difficult.

As well as these factors, there was also indisputable evidence which should have falsified such criticisms against the RAF right from the start, as found out by initial research. This includes the wreckage of RAF planes on the beaches and RAF pilots from downed craft being present on the beaches and evacuated with BEF troops. It is another intention of this thesis to look at these criticisms and the evidence, as it seems intriguing how such hostility came about despite there clearly being evidence of RAF involvement. This suggests that there were limitations and numerous odds against the RAF during the evacuation, another aim is to explore these potential limitations and difficulties, as it can help to answer the question of whether the RAF was the most significant component. It could also explain if this was a factor for why the RAF's role did not appear to be as widely remembered as the Navy or Little Ships of Dunkirk. Potential criticisms from other sources, including some that may be present in official documents, will also be looked at in addition to the complaints of troops on the beaches. It is also intended to touch upon the power myth and memory have to both sustain and taint reputations, the latter being something that has arguably happened to the RAF in the Second World War. Though this does not appear as widespread as the myth formed about Dunkirk's 'triumph', it is likely to have been formed in a similar way and was still likely shared by many people. Chapter Two will also be exploring this, adding to points made regarding myth in Chapter One.

Another area that will be touched upon is the role of the RAF after the events of Dunkirk, namely in the Battle of Britain from July to October 1940. Air Chief Marshall Hugh Dowding had made the controversial decision to not send RAF reinforcements to France before the evacuation, despite pleas from the French government, as he was concerned about the need to conserve aircraft. It is believed that this decision ended up, to an extent, benefitting the RAF during the Battle of Britain, this is something that Chapter 4 will explore in detail. It is also intended to assess how these actions could have contributed to the Dunkirk evacuations being viewed as a success, in addition to how the events at Dunkirk could have strengthened the RAF for future combat in the War.

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Mythology had also created a narrative for the Battle of Britain, one that heavily includes the RAF, focusing on their heroics against the invading Luftwaffe; arguably the main threat of the Battle of Britain. Something that the myth of the Battle of Britain has not acknowledged is how there may have been other reasons for any RAF victory, in addition to putting up a strong fight. Decisions made at the Battle of France and during Dunkirk to conserve the fleet for any future conflict could have benefitted the RAF at the Battle of Britain. It is also a possibility that the Luftwaffe may have been at a disadvantage. It is also the intention to explore how likely this could have been, which will add to my aims for Chapter Four.

To answer all of these questions as effectively as possible, a variety of resources have been consulted. These range from online resources, publications from numerous historians, archived newspaper articles, various testimonies, and official documents from departments such as the War Office and Air Ministry. It is acknowledged that there will be limitations to the research carried out, as there is the risk of certain details being missing or incorrectly written for some resources. There is also the risk of one-sidedness from some of these resources, which could prevent the whole picture being seen for certain events, to an extent. But even with these limitation in mind, they will be vital in allowing the thesis to answer its key question: ‘How significant was the role of the RAF at the Dunkirk Evacuations?’

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Literature Review

This thesis has four key themes throughout; the myth of 1940 and how this applied to Operation Dynamo, the extent to which Dunkirk can be considered successful, the part the RAF played at Dunkirk and in the Battle of Britain. These areas have been extensively written about by a wide variety of historians and authors over the years. This review examines a selection of such literature that has been used for this thesis to answer the project's key questions.

Myth and Memory

Myth has the power to shape the popular memory of historic events, which is what happened for the Dunkirk evacuation. Though the evacuation was the product of a significant defeat for the Allies in Europe, despite the operation achieving its goals, it appears to be remembered more of a 'triumph' or even a 'miracle of deliverance' as opposed to a retreat from an unstoppable enemy or the aftermath of a defeat. Malcolm Smith in 'Britain and 1940: History, Myth and Popular Memory' argues that this perception stemmed from 'narratives' that were created for these events, formed through mass reporting and propaganda through the Ministry of Information. There was a determined effort from the Ministry to report on events in a very positive light, to boost Britain's morale, leading to events being reported in a biased, or even inaccurate, way to achieve this. Smith argues this reporting by the Press and Ministry of Information created 'narratives' which became ingrained into the popular memory of these events, Dunkirk being one of these. He notes how significant radio and newspapers had become by the time of the Second World War, allowing for events to become public knowledge more quickly, having a hand in how key events could be portrayed to the public;

'The significance of the mediating role played by radio in this war cannot be overestimated. The speed with which news could be broadcast made this war a much more immediate event than any previous one. This put the BBC in an enormously powerful position to influence public constructions of the war and, as a result, its news output was closely monitored by the M.O.I; in fact, virtually all BBC wartime output was either scripted or pre-recorded.'⁹

⁹ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 47-48.

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Angus Calder in 'The Myth of the Blitz' has a similar view as he touches upon how Dunkirk was propagandised as being more successful than it was; 'the people of Britain swallowed the whole fable that the valiant BEF had been rescued from the beaches of Dunkirk by the great armada of little fishing smacks and private yachts, and therefore nothing could defeat them. It was not true, but that didn't matter. It was what was believed that counted.'¹⁰ At the same time, Calder takes a different approach, arguing that there was a pre-existing framework which formed 'narratives' for key events of 1940. These were of stories and legends of Britain 'standing along against an unbeatable enemy' while still managing to overcome these odds. Stories such as these had persisted over the centuries and the Dunkirk evacuation, as well as the Battle of Britain soon after, was an event that fit this formula. Calder gives several examples of this, arguing 'like the Armada when 'God blew and they were scattered', the bloodless miracle of the Glorious Revolution, or the providential triumph of Trafalgar, these [Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain] were events where the hand of destiny was seen.'¹¹

Mark Connelly in 'We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War' takes a different approach to Smith and a similar approach to Calder. While acknowledging the responsibility the Ministry of Information had for shaping the popular memory of key events through inaccuracies, his overall stance is there was framework for mythology already in place. Like Calder, he gives several examples of this from different periods of history;

'The reality behind Gordon's last stand in Khartoum may well be damning, but that was not the side reproduced in Boys' Own Paper or the sketches in the Illustrated London News. Rather, it was of a lone British officer taking on a seething mob of savages. Similarly, events in Zululand in 1879 were easily presentable as glorious epics. A few red-coated infantrymen alone at the remote mission station of Rorke's Drift withstood the onslaught of over 4,000 Zulu warriors. In the same year British troops fought a famous last stand against terrific odds in Afghanistan.'¹²

¹⁰ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico Books, 1992), 16.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 317.

¹² Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 57.

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He believes the Dunkirk Evacuation and the Battle of Britain both fit this framework, as Britain arguably ‘stood alone’ during this time and against Germany, which seemed like an unstoppable enemy at the time, arguing ‘it can be seen that Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain had happened long before they actually occurred.’¹³ Combined with the propaganda and misinformation by the Press and Ministry of Information, this pre-existing framework was applied to Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, creating heroic narratives for both events.

Although not as widespread as the myth of 1940, there was also a shared belief by many who were present at Dunkirk that the RAF had abandoned them. This misconception was caused by the RAF’s actions often taking place away from the beaches in addition to some limitations within the RAF, as well as the conditions at the Dunkirk beach. John Grehan in ‘Dunkirk: Nine Days That Saved an Army’ addresses this misconception by exploring the RAF’s defensive actions at and around Dunkirk for the duration of Operation Dynamo, before addressing how conditions faced by the BEF at Dunkirk had responsibility for this misconception; ‘the troops on the beaches and the ships would only have been conscious of the bombers diving down to attack them, being mostly oblivious of the life and death struggle thousands of feet higher up in the sky.’¹⁴ Norman Franks in ‘Air Battle for Dunkirk’ takes a similar stance;

‘When one is tired, hungry, wet, scared, being bombed and shot at, it is natural to look for reasons why might have been avoided. The man on the beach simply believed that if the RAF wanted to it could shoot down all the Stukas, Heinkels, Dorniers and Ju88’s that were trying to kill him and see off all the Messerschmitts buzzing above his head. Life isn’t that simple.’¹⁵

Franks similarly acknowledges how much of the RAF’s action took place away from the French coast, but appears to take the stance that the damage suffered by the RAF in the Battle of France was the primary reason for limited RAF sightings; ‘Britain’s still limited Air Force had been badly mauled in and over France since 10th May.’¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, 62.

¹⁴ John Grehan, *Dunkirk: Nine Days That Saved an Army: A Day By Day Account* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2019), 314.

¹⁵ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk* (London: William Kimber and Co. Ltd, 1983), 127.

¹⁶ Ibid, 127.

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Similar to Franks and Grehan, Greg Baughen in 'The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain' acknowledges how conditions at Dunkirk led to this misconception; 'soldiers on the front line are scarcely best-placed to be aware of all the facts. It was very easy to draw the wrong conclusions when bombs were raining down and there was not a single RAF machine in sight.'¹⁷ As shall be demonstrated further in this review, Baughen appears to be mainly critical of the RAF's strategy at Dunkirk, believing that poor strategy and lack of fighter protection being sent to Dunkirk had responsibility for this misconception to the point where he even argues how 'the soldiers and sailors at Dunkirk may not have had all the evidence, but they were essentially correct.'¹⁸ As already stated, this misconception was by no means particularly widespread, though it is one that would have inevitably been shared by a large number of people, but it does demonstrate the power memory has to shape perspectives.

Like with the Dunkirk evacuation, myth would also shape the 'narrative' and popular memory of the Battle of Britain from July to October 1941. Not only did it fit the pre-existing framework of mythology, but it is believed that an attempt was made by the Press and Ministry of Information to compensate for the hasty retreat made from Dunkirk. This attempt involved a romanticisation of the RAF's pilots, or 'The Few' as they would become known. Derek Wood in 'The Narrow Margin: The Battle of Britain and the Rise of Air Power' argues that this portrayal of the RAF pilots was very different from how they were in reality;

'The picture is of a small band of invincible aces, brilliant, debonair and gay, flying into battle again and again, with vapour trails across the blue skies, shooting down German after German, and occasionally falling themselves when outnumbered... most of the squadrons were not like that, however. Many went into action confident and gay and withdrew as a battered remnant ten days or a fortnight later. There were the very young and over-confident and inexperienced with little idea what it was all about. There were the many thoroughly competent

¹⁷ Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain* (Oxford: Fonthill Media Ltd, 2016), 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 209.

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pilots, courageous and determined, but who lacked the speed and instinct needed to live long in action.’¹⁹

Clearly, this portrayal of the RAF pilots neglected the difficulties and harsh conditions that were faced by the RAF, demonstrating the power mythology has to shape popular memory.

Dunkirk: Defeat or Deliverance?

Examining the myth of 1940 and how it resulted in Dunkirk’s portrayal in popular memory will prove crucial to determine the extent to which Dunkirk can be seen as a ‘success’, which is one of the key questions of this thesis. While Operation Dynamo achieved its ambitions, it does not change the fact that it was the result of a significant military defeat. John Grehan in ‘Dunkirk: Nine Days That Saved an Army’ appears to take a mixed view on Dunkirk’s arguable success. He argues Operation Dynamo succeeded at what it set out to do, while at the same time acknowledging that much was lost at Dunkirk; ‘amidst the relief and the rejoicing over the evacuation, and the undoubted heroism of so many individuals, the fact was that 68,000 men of Britain’s only field army had been killed, wounded, taken prisoner or listed as missing, many of the latter lost in the seas off Dunkirk. The RAF lost 1,526 killed in action, died of wounds or injury, lost at sea, wounded or taken prisoner... it was, at the time, the heaviest defeat that Britain had ever suffered.’²⁰ Robert Jackson in ‘Dunkirk, The British Evacuation 1940’ takes a similar view to Grehan in that he believes Dunkirk was both successful and a significant defeat, but takes his view further than Grehan, arguing ‘it may also be said that out of this, the biggest single defeat ever suffered by British arms, grew the shoots of later victory.’²¹ Dunkirk was very much a defeat, a very significant one at that, but it could have been the catalyst for later victory, given how Dynamo accomplished its mission of returning as much of the BEF to Britain as possible.

Geoffrey Stewart in ‘Dunkirk and the Fall of France’ takes a view that is comparatively more negative than Grehan and Jackson, appearing to take the view that

¹⁹ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin: The Battle of Britain and the Rise of Air Power* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd), Page 540.

²⁰ John Grehan, *Dunkirk: Nine Days That Saved an Army*, 303-4.

²¹ Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2012), 137.

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Dunkirk was much more of a defeat than success. He argues that any ‘success’ Dynamo encountered was primarily down to good fortune; ‘luck was to be a decisive factor in the Dunkirk operation... the unusually calm seas facilitated the evacuation. The cloud cover on several days, particularly the 28th and the 30th, reduced the threat from the Luftwaffe.’²² He does, however, note how the different components of the evacuation did help to make Dunkirk a successful mission;

‘In addition to luck, there were a host of human virtues: the professionalism of the Royal Navy under the leadership of Ramsey and Tennant... the contribution of the RAF and, above all, the heroism and dogged determination of most of the British troops’²³

His overall view of Dynamo’s outcome, despite acknowledging how it had success, be it down to good fortune or the activity of those involved, is a negative one, as he argues that it was still the result of a significant Allied defeat;

‘The reputation of the British Field Force has of course suffered, for although Dunkirk may have been a deliverance – partially mitigating for the British the humiliation of a lost campaign – it still was a lost campaign. The loss of heavy equipment and transport was on a colossal scale. For the army that had played such a significant part in the defeat of Germany in 1918, it was a humiliating reversal of roles.’²⁴

Julian Thompson in ‘Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory’ takes a similar view to Stewart, having an overall negative view on Dunkirk evacuation;

‘The only miraculous element in the operation was the weather: gales and high seas would have allowed far fewer troops to be taken off – probably none from the beaches, and drastically fewer from the seaward side of the East Mole [a temporary embarkation platform set up at the Dunkirk beach].’²⁵

²² Geoffrey Stewart, *Dunkirk and the Fall of France* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2008), 238.

²³ *Ibid*, 238.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 239.

²⁵ Julian Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory* (London: Pan Publishing, 2009), 319.

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Walter Lord in 'The Miracle of Dunkirk: The True Story of Operation Dynamo' takes a view similar to Stewart and Thompson, arguing that good fortune was primarily responsible for any 'success' Dunkirk had;

'There were several miracles. First, the weather. The English Channel is usually rough, rarely behaves for very long. Yet a calm sea was essential to the evacuation, and during the nine days of Dunkirk the Channel was a millpond. Old-timers still say they have never seen it so smooth... another miracle was Adolf Hitler's order of May 24, halting his tanks just as they were closing in for the kill... by the time the tanks began rolling again in the predawn hours of 27 May, the escape corridor had been established, the BEF was pouring into Dunkirk and Ramsay's rescue fleet was hard at work.'²⁶

Sean Longden in 'Dunkirk: The Men They Left Behind' takes a much more negative view on the Dunkirk evacuation. As implied from the title of his book, his stance is that Dunkirk was not entirely the 'triumph' it has been remembered as over the years, by the end of the evacuation, there were still many troops that did not return to Britain; 'more shocking than all this, however, was a single chilling statistic – 68,111 men of the BEF did not return home across the Channel at all. Thousands were the dead, wounded or missing but almost 40,000 British soldiers were alive and already being marched off into a captivity that would last for five long years.'²⁷ From his wording of this fact, it is clear he believes this loss was very significant, despite the achievements of the Dunkirk evacuation. Even if more troops were rescued than initially anticipated, at 338,000 compared to the estimate of 30,000, the fact remained that many the BEF were not rescued.

From these examples, there appears to be a consensus that the Dunkirk evacuation was not the 'triumph' or 'miracle of deliverance' that it has been portrayed as by myth. Even if many troops were saved, there were many who weren't, with much material loss for the BEF as well. Furthermore, it was still the result of a defeat and most 'successful' or 'miraculous' elements were down to good fortune.

²⁶ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk: The True Story of Operation Dynamo* (New York: Open Road Media, 2017), 357-8.

²⁷ Sean Longden, *Dunkirk, The Men They Left Behind* (London: Constable, 2009), 22.

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The Role of the RAF at Dunkirk

While the myth of 1940 and the extent of Dunkirk's success are important to this thesis, the focus is the role of the RAF at Dunkirk, in addition to its actions before and after Dunkirk, with the aim being to assess how crucial they were the Dunkirk evacuations. Norman Franks in 'Air Battle for Dunkirk', although acknowledging how much had been lost at Dunkirk, material and human alike, takes a positive stance on the role of the RAF throughout, even arguing it had secured something of a 'victory' over the Luftwaffe;

'The RAF, nevertheless, deserve to call Dunkirk a victory. It carried out its assigned task to the best of its ability with the limited numbers at its disposal. It had also been blooded and as far as experience was concerned was in a far better position for the Battles over Britain to come than it had been.'²⁸

Harry Raffal in 'Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk' takes a more critical view of the RAF's performance at Dunkirk;

'For the RAF, Dynamo was in part a story of marginal contributions and anti-naval patrols by Coastal Command... the main operations of the RAF, undertaken by Fighter Command, represented, however, a significant defeat. During Operation Dynamo Fighter Command failed to effectively contest air superiority over the evacuation and protect the embarkation and shipping at Dunkirk.'²⁹

John Grehan appears to share Franks' view that the RAF was successful at Dunkirk, arguing how 'the RAF did respond, mounting 287 sorties along the coast from Gravelines as far as Ostend, claiming to have shot down twenty-one German bombers.'³⁰ His views are also evenly-sided like Franks as also acknowledges more of the difficulties and losses that were faced. Like Grehan, Robert Jackson takes a balanced look at the RAF's losses and successes, and in a near-similar fashion to Franks implies that they secured something of a victory at Dunkirk. He notes '...inland the battered French and British air squadrons which had opposed the German assault

²⁸ Norman Franks, *The Air Battle of Dunkirk*, 144.

²⁹ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 303

³⁰ John Grehan, *Dunkirk: Nine Days That Saved an Army*, 85.

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so valiantly had withdrawn their remnants south of the Somme, leaving the Luftwaffe as mistress of the sky.’³¹ This view appears slightly more downplayed than Franks’ view as he does also say that the Luftwaffe had not achieved supremacy over the Channel and had been hard hit at times, indicating he views the RAF as being triumphant at Dunkirk.

Geoffrey Stewart in ‘Dunkirk and the Fall of France’, however, takes a different view, claiming that the success of the RAF at Dunkirk has often been exaggerated. For instance, he notes:

‘The Air Ministry claimed that the RAF had inflicted a crippling defeat on Goering’s planes by destroying 390 of them... the real losses in the area were 132’³² and ‘the German Messerschmitt Bf 109 E was an excellent fighter, superior in speed to the Hurricane but slightly inferior to the Supermarine Spitfire... [it] lacked manoeuvrability and proved vulnerable to both British fighters.’³³

The latter perhaps suggests that there were deficiencies on the Luftwaffe’s part, indicating they may not have been at full strength at Dunkirk in turn slightly downplaying the significance of the RAF’s role. Julian Thompson takes a similar view to Stewart, downplaying the role of the RAF, noting ‘the part played by the Royal Navy had been consistently underestimated; without it the considerable contribution by the RAF and the courage and skill of the BEF would have been to no avail.’³⁴ Thompson appears to suggest it was the Navy that played a more vital role than that of the RAF. While this statement may be biased, the Royal Navy did indeed play a significant role in downing Luftwaffe craft, so this arguably opinion-based statement is not without some credence.

Walter Lord appear to take a mixed stance on the effectiveness of the part they played. On one hand, he notes details such as ‘eighteen RAF bombers, supported by six planes from the Fleet Air Arm, swept in from the seas, smashing and scattering the enemy

³¹ Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation*, 91.

³² Geoffrey Stewart, *Dunkirk and the Fall of France*, 205.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Julian Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory*, 209.

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forces',³⁵ emphasising just how they were able to do significant damage to the Luftwaffe, in a similar vein to Franks. On the other hand, he does appear to have a somewhat critical view at times, including noting how 'there were four more periods during the day when the RAF could provide no fighter cover, and the Luftwaffe cashed in on them all.'³⁶, perhaps suggesting the RAF was not entirely as effective as they could have been.

Winston Churchill in 'Their Finest Hour' has a positive stance on the RAF's role at Dunkirk as he argues; 'Fighter Command maintained successive patrols over the scene, and fought the enemy at long odds... hour after hour they bit into the German fighter and bomber squadrons... this went on, till the glorious victory of the Royal Air Force was gained'³⁷ and 'the 28th [of May]' was a day of tension, which gradually eased as the position on land was stabilised with the powerful help of the Royal Air Force',³⁸ clearly believing that they achieved a victory at Dunkirk. Despite this, there is the danger that some of his claims may not be entirely truthful, as Geoffrey Stewart had noted that exaggerations had been made about the RAF's actions against the Luftwaffe; Stewart even accuses Churchill of this; 'Churchill and the British authorities exaggerated the damage inflicted on the Luftwaffe for propaganda purposes, anxious to serve up a victory of some sort.'³⁹ This raises the possibility that Churchill may also have exaggerated in some parts of his book.

In contrast, Greg Baughen in 'The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain' takes a rather critical view of the RAF at Dunkirk. In a similar vein to Raffal, he is critical of the strategies used by the RAF. For instance, he notes 'the fighters attempting to tackle the bombers needed cover above them, but often even the lower fighter formations were flying too high to deal with the Stukas. Low-level fighter cover had been poor throughout the campaign. In tactical operations, the RAF had to be effective at all altitudes, which meant fighters operating at low level as well as high altitudes.'⁴⁰ He believes the Air Staff and Commanders of the RAF and Air Ministry

³⁵ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk: The True Story of Operation Dynamo*, 254

³⁶ *Ibid*, 281

³⁷ Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 91

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ Geoffrey Stewart, *Dunkirk and the Fall of France*, 204.

⁴⁰ Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain*, 210.

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were responsible for poor strategy, arguing they held back too many fighter aircraft because of misjudging the threat of the Luftwaffe bombers. He believes more could have been done regarding the dispatch of aircraft to Dunkirk; ‘there is no denying that the fighters that were used made a difference... opposed bombing was far less effective than unopposed bombings... there were times when there were no fighters at all, and when they were present, there were not enough of them... if the Air Staff and Dowding had so wished, Fighter Command could have done more.’⁴¹ However, Baughen also argues that there were failings on the part of the Luftwaffe;

‘It was not just RAF commanders who were getting it wrong; Goring also had an exaggerated idea of what bombers could achieve. Air forces could not destroy armies. German victories had been achieved by the Panzers and Air Force working together. It seemed that air power worked best when it was supporting forces on the ground.’⁴²

From this, he clearly believes there were flawed strategies on both sides, meaning neither was truly successful when it came to making use of their air forces.

These examples suggest a consensus which views the RAF as being important to Dunkirk, but having flawed strategies which hampered their performance in some way.

The RAF in the Battle of Britain

While the RAF’s role at Dunkirk is the primary focus, this thesis also intends to focus on the RAF’s role in the Battle of Britain from July to October 1940. The Battle of Britain was the second phase of Germany’s conquest following the Battle of France and their successful invasion of north-west Europe. The battle became the first time Nazi Germany had failed to conquer any part of Europe. Like with Operation Dynamo, it is the intention to examine the extent of the RAF’s success during this period.

Greg Baughen in ‘The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain’ appears to take the stance that, while the RAF was important, their strategy was once again flawed. As with his stance on the RAF’s role at Dunkirk, he believes the Luftwaffe had

⁴¹ Ibid, 210.

⁴² Ibid, 211.

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a flawed strategy and the RAF was primarily successful during the Battle of Britain, and the Dunkirk evacuations to an extent, because of this;

‘Before even contemplating victory, Britain had to avoid defeat. Alone and isolated, it seemed only a miracle could save Britain from becoming Germany’s next conquest. That miracle proved to be the German decision to take a leaf out of the British book of strategy. Three times the Germans decided to rely on air power operating independently of ground forces to gain victory. Three times it failed. First, the Luftwaffe failed to stop the British Army escaping from Dunkirk. Then it failed to destroy Fighter Command in the Battle of Britain. Finally, it failed to break the morale of the British people with the Blitz. The strategy used on these three occasions was not how Germany had conquered most of Europe.’⁴³

Similarly, Derek Wood and Derek Dempster in ‘The Narrow Margin’ take a similar stance arguing ‘in this uneven proportion of fighters and bombers may be found the fundamental reason for Goring’s failure to achieve his objectives. He thought the Hurricanes and Spitfires could be quickly brushed aside. He misjudged the quality of the planes, the spirit of the pilots who flew them and the men on the ground who backed them up.’⁴⁴ Their argument is that there was poor strategic planning on the part of the Luftwaffe, which ended up giving them a disadvantage during the Battle of Britain. Unlike at Dunkirk when they were operating over land that was very soon to be occupied, the Luftwaffe was operating over new territory that was not close to being occupied by Germany and would have had more ground to cover.

While arguing that there were failings in the Luftwaffe, James Holland in ‘The Battle of Britain: Five Months Which Changed History’ also believes the role of the RAF should not be downplayed because of this; ‘Luftwaffe failings, however, should not detract from the achievements of the RAF... had it not had such a superb defensive system, and had it not had such inspired and brilliant leaders, the Luftwaffe would still have prevailed, no matter how valiant or skilled the pilots.’⁴⁵

⁴³ Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain*, 306.

⁴⁴ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin*, 541.

⁴⁵ James Holland, *The Battle of Britain: Five Months Which Changed History*, (London: Bantam Press, 2010), 847.

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Jon Lake in 'The Battle of Britain' takes a view similar to Dempster and Wood, arguing that the RAF was the most significant component for the Battle of Britain, although doing so in a more critical manner;

'The Luftwaffe had been unable to achieve the air supremacy required for an invasion and admittedly failed to crush its enemy... at the same time the RAF had similarly failed to destroy the Luftwaffe and was unable to win complete control of its own airspace'⁴⁶.

Indeed, though the Battle of Britain was successful for the Allies, the fact remained the conflict was far from over. The Luftwaffe was still at large and would continue to bomb London until May 1941, a period which would become known as 'The Blitz'.

Also to be examined within the thesis is the decisions made by Dowding to conserve the RAF's fleet during the Battle of France, made from concerns of his about the RAF not having enough resources for combat in the near future. The aim is to assess whether he was correct to do so. Wood and Dempster take an overall positive view of Dowding, arguing 'he was dedicated to the task of defending Britain against air attack and he would go to any lengths to ensure that the forces were matched to the task,'⁴⁷ which implies they believe his decisions were correct ones in the long run.

Greg Baughen, however, takes a more critical view of Dowding's decisions. While he acknowledges Dowding's concerns were down to the statistics for losses and production at the time, he appears to take the stance that Dowding's decisions were rather short-sighted in the long run; 'if losing France as an ally kept his Fighter Command intact, it was a price that he was willing to pay. It was the tunnel vision of a Commander who could not see beyond his assigned mission of defending British airspace.'⁴⁸ Norman Franks in 'Air Battle for Dunkirk', however, while acknowledging the shortcomings of the RAF at Dunkirk, believes that Dowding's decision was a wise one overall, arguing 'he [Dowding] would not have been thanked if Britain's defensive element had been lost to no end in France when the Luftwaffe was finally unleashed against England in August 1940.'⁴⁹ As will be explained in Chapter One, the RAF took

⁴⁶ Jon Lake, *The Battle of Britain* (Steyning: Bookmark Ltd, 2000), 142.

⁴⁷ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin*, 534.

⁴⁸ Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain*, 195.

⁴⁹ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 140.

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much damage at the Battle of France. While sending more aircraft could have helped the Allies in the Battle of France, it could have led to less aircraft being available for the Battle of Britain later in 1940.

In the examples presented, there is clearly a shared view that Britain's victory at the Battle of Britain was not entirely down to the actions of the RAF, though they were still important, the Luftwaffe was at a disadvantage unlike at Dunkirk. Also shared for the most part is the view that Dowding's decisions may not have helped at Dunkirk, but did prove to be necessary. were necessary ones.

Conclusion

From the examples of literature in this review, there are differing opinions relating to the key topics of this thesis. However, what it demonstrates more significantly is how nearly all of these appear to oppose the 'narratives' formed by myth for the Dunkirk Evacuation and the Battle of Britain to an extent. Whether it was down to biased reporting or good fortune, there appears to be a consensus that Dunkirk was not the success story or the 'miracle of deliverance' that it has been made out to be through the myth of 1940. In the case of the Battle of Britain, the over-arching view appears to be that its success was likely exaggerated, through attempts to romanticise the RAF and the Luftwaffe being at a disadvantage. However, a consensus appears to be that both Operation Dynamo and the RAF managed to achieve what they set out to do, despite the former being the result of an Allied defeat and the latter having poor strategy. Therefore, the consensus appears to be that the RAF was able to play a significant role at Dunkirk. Understanding these arguments will prove useful for writing this thesis, as the extent to which Dunkirk really was a 'success' and just how significant the RAF was to Dunkirk are crucial arguments within the thesis.

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Chapter 1: Finest Hour or just a Myth? An Overview and Evaluation of the Dunkirk Evacuation

Introduction

Dunkirk, a coastal town located in Northern France, is no stranger to conflict. It was the location for battles during the Middle Ages and the First World War. However, from May to June 1940, it would become the setting for one of the most significant events and turning points in the Second World War – the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) after a surprise assault and defeat from the German armed forces. The evacuation from Dunkirk, or Operation Dynamo as it was codenamed, quickly rose to fame, and left behind a formidable legacy. Though Operation Dynamo would succeed in what it aimed to do, evacuate as many British troops from France as possible, and its legacy is by no means undeserved, it is likely that Dunkirk being the success story it is renowned as today could, in some way, be down to myth. As shall be explained, it was the positive aspects of Dunkirk that were heavily reported to the public to boost morale, in turn creating a narrative that Dunkirk was a resounding success and a remarkable achievement. It is the intention of this chapter to explore the extent to how successful Operation Dynamo truly was and how its perceived success could be because of myth. Also spoken about in this chapter are the evacuation's events, key events before and after and the legacy it created and still has to this day, as exploring these will help to answer this chapter's key question.

The common 'narrative' for the Dunkirk evacuation appears to be that it was 'a victory snatched from the jaws of defeat', creating a myth, a myth that the Dunkirk evacuation was a triumph for the Allies. However, what seems to have been glossed over in the public memory and the common narrative is the defeat the BEF suffered in mainland Europe in the days leading up to Operation Dynamo. Britain was able to keep an army by the end of the evacuation and many troops had been successfully ferried back to Britain, but the BEF, and thereby the Allies, had still suffered a significant defeat: a defeat that necessitated the evacuation.

Prelude to Dynamo

Following Germany's invasion of Poland, the BEF was sent to France on 9 September 1939, under the command of General John Vereker 6th Viscount Gort, the

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Commander-in-chief of the BEF.⁵⁰ They arrived in Cherbourg, Saint-Nazaire and Nantes, intending to defend the country from any potential attacks by Germany. The BEF also had support from the French First, Seventh and Ninth Armies as well as support from the Belgian Army. As part of this alliance, Gort would share command with French commander-in-chief General Maurice Gamelin and took orders from General Alphonse Joseph Georges, commander of the north-east armies. Although he did not have authority over it, the BEF would also be part of General Gaston-Henri Billotte's First Army Group.⁵¹ The BEF's campaign had a good start, there was little resistance from Nazi Germany and France had been prepared for German invasion with the construction of the Maginot Line. This was a series of fortifications built along the border with Germany to prevent any invasions, instead of diverting their attacks to Belgium, where they could be fought by the strongest French Army divisions. To the north of the Maginot Line was the dense Ardennes Forest.⁵² This series of fortifications was believed by the French Army to be 'impenetrable' and posed 'very little threat'. It was also seen by France to be, as Geoffrey Stewart puts it, 'an intelligent answer to the problem facing French planners of a much larger German population from which a much larger army could be raised.'⁵³

This advantage drastically changed on 10 May 1940. This day saw the launch of Germany's 'Blitzkrieg' (lightning war), a lightning-fast attack on Europe that saw Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium invaded in quick succession. Luxembourg was occupied by Germany very soon after the Blitzkrieg's launch, followed by the Netherlands a mere few days later, on 14 May. Shortly after the Blitzkrieg was the Battle of Belgium, fought by Belgian and Allied troops against Germany's armed forces, lasting from 10 to 18 May 1940. This ended with Belgian troops surrendering and Belgium being occupied by Germany.

⁵⁰ History of War: John Vereker, Sixth Viscount Gort, 1886-1942 (19 February 2008) - http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/people_lord_gort.html

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Geoffrey Stewart, *Dunkirk and the Fall of France* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2009), 34

⁵³ Ibid

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The 'Blitzkrieg' was so powerful and so rapid that the Allies had been caught off guard. Norman Franks' description demonstrates just how powerful and effective the Blitzkrieg was within such a short time:

'The attack when it came took the Allied forces by surprise and such opposition that they could muster was soon overwhelmed... in Holland the Dutch Air Force was virtually destroyed by 13th May... Rotterdam was bombed the next day and by the 15th the Dutch Army, though still intact, surrendered'.⁵⁴

The German Forces attacked with great ferocity, that Belgian areas which were well-defended, and believed to be nearly as strong as the Maginot Line, rapidly fell to the enemy. One of these was Fort Eban-Emael, a large underground fort with 3 well-secured bridges over Albert Canal. German armoured troops seized two of the secured bridges of this fort and were able to cross the Belgian border with no difficulty.⁵⁵ The Belgian troops would be supported by the BEF and French troops, but not even this was not enough to turn the situation in their favour. On May 14 1940, the BEF was forced into a retreat after being overwhelmed by the German armed forces at the Battle of Belgium; the start of their gradual 'fighting withdrawal' across Belgium and France, an event that became the catalyst for Operation Dynamo.

Despite the German 'Blitzkrieg' evidently being an unstoppable and powerful force, it is a possibility it may not have been the sole reason why the Allies were now on the losing side. It is believed there were inefficiencies within the French Armed Forces fighting alongside the British soldiers. Many French troops were poorly trained and ill-equipped, which would have allowed the German Forces to overwhelm the French Army.⁵⁶ The initial plan involving the use of the Maginot Line also backfired as the Nazi ground forces merely avoided it by using the Ardennes Forest to begin their assault on France.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk* (London: William Kimber & Co., 1983), 7

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Stewart, *Dunkirk and the Fall of France*, 70.

⁵⁶ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid

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It is also arguable that the British Forces could, to an extent, have had some responsibility for the retreat across France, as suggested by Hugh Sebag-Montefiore;

‘British officers in France had seen clear signs indicating that many French soldiers were undisciplined, poorly-trained, and that morale in the French Army was very low... if these findings had been properly circulated, it is just possible that after the German breakthrough on the Meuse [area near French Border], British politicians and generals would not have entertained the unrealistic hope that the French would recover, and an earlier decision might have been made to evacuate the British troops from France’.⁵⁸

This implies many British Army Officers appeared to be fully aware of the failings of the French Armed Forces but did not act accordingly. A recollection from Captain Peter Barclay of the Royal Norfolk Regiment 2nd Battalion also suggests that communication systems, in general, were very poor;

‘On 14th May, we received the order to pull back over the river. We received the order on a line telephone. Communications were very poor compared with the situation later in the war. If the line telephone had failed, we would have relied on flares from Very pistols, which were very unsatisfactory’⁵⁹

Regardless of which faction has responsibility, the situation was becoming near impossible for the Allies to turn around. By 19 May 1940, the seeds for an evacuation were already being sown. General John Gort had already begun giving serious consideration to evacuating the entire BEF.⁶⁰ While British command was firmly against the idea of evacuation and the French forces were determined to continue holding out, this changed when news came of the BEF being forced back towards the English Channel. Although Prime Minister Winston Churchill still believed the best option was for the Allies to press ahead and fight back, he began seeing the Evacuation as a viable option;

⁵⁸ Hugh Sebag-Montaire, *Dunkirk Fight to the Last Man* (London: Penguin Publishing, 2015), 65

⁵⁹ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk* (London: Ebury Press, 2010), 62.

⁶⁰ History of War: John Vereker, Sixth Viscount Gort, 1886-1942 (19 February 2008) - http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/people_lord_gort.html

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‘We therefore sent him [the commander-in-chief] to Lord Gort with instructions to move the British Army in a south-westerly direction and to force his way through all opposition to join up with the French in the south... or, alternatively, that we would evacuate as many of their troops as possible from the Channel ports.’⁶¹

This was a change from his previous stance on the situation. During his visit to Paris on 15 May to speak with French leaders, he found out for himself how catastrophic the situation was for the Allies, and that there was a possibility of defeat. This proved to be difficult for Churchill because, as Walter Lord puts it, ‘no one was more offensive-minded than Churchill – nobody prodded Gort harder – but every contingency had to be faced and his visit to Paris on the 16th was a sobering experience’.⁶² Evidently, Churchill was determined for the BEF to succeed, as he believed they would achieve a victory, but he was now facing what he must have regarded as an unthinkable prospect.

On 20 May, plans to evacuate the BEF and Allied troops began. The plans were headed by Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay at a navy headquarters beneath Dover Castle.⁶³ This operation was given the codename ‘Operation Dynamo’, named after a room in the Dover Castle tunnels, which had once held a dynamo. The initial phase of the Evacuation was to first evacuate personnel from Dunkirk who were deemed unnecessary. The BEF’s assistant adjutant General Colonel Gerald Whitfield was sent by the BEF to Dunkirk to oversee this phase. There, he witnessed the grim reality of the situation at Dunkirk; many troops were stranded with morale being low and leadership from their officers being of poor standard.⁶⁴ This phase did not go to plan as thousands of these soldiers had descended on the ports so they could escape, even

⁶¹ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War Volume 2: Their Finest Hour*, (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 48.

⁶² Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk* (New York: Open Road Media, 2012), 60.

⁶³ History of War: Sir Bertram Home Ramsey (1883-1945) - http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/people_ramsay_bertram.html

⁶⁴ Mark Connelly and Walter Miller, “The BEF and the Issue of Surrender on the Western Front in 1940”, *War in History* 11/4 (2004): 435.

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many officers who Whitfield commandeered to help him ‘vanished onto the boats without a word’.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, despite the ‘fighting withdrawal’ the BEF was forced into, they tried to fight back at the Battle of Arras from 21 to 22 May. Two infantry battalions of around 2,000 troops attacked German Forces at Arras, France, succeeding at first but were soon overwhelmed by German troops, suffering many losses in the process. Though the BEF retreated, the French Army continued the attack, as part of an operation codenamed ‘Frankforce’, formed on 20 May and named after Major General Harold Franklyn, Commander of the 5th Division.⁶⁶ They fought back with ease, taking 400 prisoners with a similar number of casualties. However, despite their spirited fighting, it would still be a victory for Germany. At the same time, Frankforce and the 1st Light Mechanized Division which also fought towards the end of the Battle managed to achieve an element of surprise and caused widespread alarm amongst German command.⁶⁷ Despite being on the defensive against Germany since the Blitzkrieg launched on 10 May 1940, the BEF had managed to have some partial success in this battle. While it was not a victory for them, this surprise attack of theirs against the advancing German forces would become a reason why Germany’s pursuit against them would later slow down.

During the Blitzkrieg, the RAF was tasked with disrupting the German advance across Europe. They were tasked with attacking troop and transport columns and ammunition dumps. As well as these targets, they also attacked roads, railways and river crossings in France to prevent supplies and reinforcements being sent to the German armed forces and to prevent the advance of German troops. Despite the RAF losing many aircraft and crews, several of these attacks would prove to be successful. However, these successes were not particularly significant in the long run as they failed to prevent the German forces advancing across France and forcing the BEF back to Dunkirk.

⁶⁵ Henry Buckton, *Retreat: Dunkirk and the Evacuation of Western Europe* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2017), 131.

⁶⁶ Jerry Murland, *Frankforce and the Defence of Arras* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2017), 42.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 212.

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The Allies' retreat came to a head from the 22 to 26 May. The Battle of Boulogne from 22 to 25 May saw the BEF and French troops fighting against the II Panzer Division of Germany. Despite the best efforts of British and French troops, they were largely unprepared as they had few anti-tank weapons, making their fight against German tanks difficult.⁶⁸ The Panzer Division's attack became much more determined, forcing the British troops to be evacuated. Several Navy destroyers were sent to undertake this evacuation operation and fought against the German tanks on the shore, until the Division captured French coastal gun batteries and used them on the ships, forcing a retreat.⁶⁹ By 24 May, still determined to continue the fight, the French garrison held the citadel of Boulogne. The citadel had the advantage of 30-foot walls thought to provide a defence. However, the Nazi forces overcame these using scaling ladders to reduce the walls to rubble, capturing the citadel with ease.⁷⁰ Such was the ferocity of their opponents that the French garrison surrendered on 25 May, with 5,000 troops captured and taken prisoner. While this battle was a defeat, there was some partial success on the part of the Allies as this battle had delayed the German advance to Dunkirk, giving time for the Evacuation to be planned.

Meanwhile, the real final stand of this fighting withdrawal took place at the Siege of Calais from 23 May to 26 May, which saw British and French troops fighting against German armoured units, namely the 10th Panzer Division, that were advancing on the city. The Allies managed to have some success during this battle as they managed to deal some damage by destroying numerous tanks of the 10th Panzer Division.⁷¹ Both sides of the Battle received additional support, the Luftwaffe supported the German Forces, while the Allies were supported by both their Navies who attacked German targets at the port, delivered supplies and evacuated the wounded.

The remaining Allied forces fought to the end, to the point where on 26 May the German forces demanded their surrender. However, this demand was refused by the Allies and so their opponents not only continued their assault but also brought more ammunition in the form of the Luftwaffe which bombed from above.⁷² It was not long

⁶⁸ Jon Cooksey, *Boulogne: The Guards Brigade Fighting Defence* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2009), 220.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 278.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 320.

⁷¹ Eric Linklater, *The Defence of Calais, The Army at War Series* (London: A&C Black Publishing, July 2014), 16.

⁷² *Ibid*, 21-22.

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before the Anglo-French garrison in Calais was overwhelmed and by 16:00hrs, they had control of the harbour, although the garrison still held out.⁷³ Eventually, the garrison was forced to surrender and were taken prisoner. Like the Battle of Boulogne, the Siege of Calais was another defeat for the BEF. However, there was again partial success on their part, as they were able to delay the German advance on Dunkirk, buying some time for the evacuation to commence. Despite this, there was no changing the outcome of these battles; the ports of Boulogne and Calais were captured by Germany on 26 May 1940. The British forces withdrew to the Beaches and Ports of Dunkirk, as it was the only place from which they could easily escape back to Britain.

From 10 May up to the eve of the evacuation on 26 May 1940, the BEF in Europe had suffered a catastrophic defeat, almost always being on the receiving end of attacks from an enemy force that must have seemed unbeatable. An advance that had taken several months was completely undone in just over two weeks, with the BEF forced all the way back to the coast of Northern France, even then the relentlessness of Germany left only one stronghold - Dunkirk. With Operation Dynamo being the product of this defeat, it certainly wouldn't have felt like a victory or triumph to the thousands of BEF soldiers evacuated or to the planners of the evacuation. It even may have seemed like Dynamo was destined to fail, as the evacuation planners likely thought Dunkirk would not be spared from German occupation. A message sent 16:46hrs on 25 May 1940 to the War Office indicates how this prospect could have seemed near-impossible. It mentions how German armed forces were at Gravellines and had got dangerously close to Dunkirk, adding how they 'did not think it was possible to hold Dunkirk'.⁷⁴

However, right before the evacuation, there were several factors which would work in the Allies' favour. Though Dunkirk was one of three places from which troops were to be evacuated from, it was an ideal location. It had a spacious part, was surrounded by marshy terrain which could make it difficult for advancing German forces to catch up with the BEF and was home to the longest sandy beach in Europe; an ideal location to assemble large groups of people.

⁷³ Ibid, 23.

⁷⁴ TNA: WO 106/1607 - Channel ports; defence of Dunkirk.

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Furthermore, the very same forces which had pursued the BEF would unintentionally and perhaps unexpectedly end up giving the BEF an advantage. On 23 May, concerns were being raised by German Fourth Army Commander General Gunther von Kluge about Dunkirk's marshy terrain being unsuitable for tanks and how they could end up becoming vulnerable to enemy attack in the process; aiming to avoid losing large amounts of tanks.⁷⁵ The ferocity of the French Armed Forces' attack against that of Germany's at Arras was still a cause for concern, there were concerns about the possibility of having to face another similar counterattack.⁷⁶

Kluge ordered his advancing forces to halt. These concerns of his were also shared by Adolf Hitler himself once he heard about the situation, on 24 May, and officially gave the order for the advancing ground forces to halt.⁷⁷ However, their ambitions to crush their opponents were anything but forgotten about. The Luftwaffe was still deployed to advance towards and attack the Allied Forces, the number of units in operation within this Air Force was believed to be sufficient for this.⁷⁸ The stranded troops still had their backs against the wall as a result as they were forced to endure attacks from the Luftwaffe which relentlessly flew over and attacked the port and beaches of Dunkirk. However, this assault did not start immediately. On the 25 and 26 May, they were focused on attacking the Allied Forces that still held out against the advancing German forces at Calais. This allowed the evacuations to commence without disruption from attacks, another unintentional advantage given to the Allies by the German forces.

Though they still allowed Operation Dynamo to commence, these advantages were only chance occurrences. It is easy to see that the commencement of the evacuation could have gone either way; the Panzer Divisions may not have decided to halt and the last Allied stronghold may not have been as suitable for the evacuation as Dunkirk was.

Even so, the relief of no Luftwaffe attacks was short-lived, commencing on the first full day of evacuations on 27 May and they would continue to do everything in their

⁷⁵ Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Dunkirk: German Operations in France, 1940* (Pennsylvania: Casemate Publishers, translation edition, 2019), 103.

⁷⁶ Jerry Murland, *Frankforce and the Defence of Arras*, 212.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 212.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

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power to try and put a stop to the evacuations, launching several disruptive attacks. Such assaults are detailed later in the project. Furthermore, the lull in the German ground forces' attack did not last long. Hitler ordered them to continue with their advance on 26 May.⁷⁹ However, by this time the Allies had already started to put their evacuation plans into action. While the difference that this pause in the attack would have made to the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk is unknown, it is very likely Operation Dynamo would not have got off to a good start and many fewer troops would have been rescued. It is also possible that had the lull in the attack not happened, there may not have even been sufficient time for Evacuation plans to be put into place. This could also have been the case had the Luftwaffe started combing the beaches on 25 through to 26 May. Intriguingly, it seems like it was these actions of the German Armed Forces, albeit unintentionally, that really allowed the evacuation to be able to commence. Despite some partial success from the Allies at Arras and the Battles of Boulogne and Calais, these ultimately did not stop the German forces, which still proved relentless and would have continued their advance to Dunkirk.

Operation Dynamo Commences

On the evening of May 26 1940, at 18:57hrs,⁸⁰ the order was given by the Admiralty for the evacuation to commence. A large array of ships were gathered to begin the evacuation; fifteen 'Personnel' ships mainly cross-Channel ferries at Dover, with another 17 at Southampton, as well as three Dutch and Belgian ferries, six coastal ships and sixteen barges.⁸¹ These two examples alone demonstrated the unconventional methods that were used to rescue the stranded Allied forces; everyday non-military craft such as passenger steamships were requisitioned by the Navy and were being used for missions they had not been built for. The despatch of personnel vessels had already commenced prior to the order being given to begin the evacuation, at 15:00hrs. The BEF also agreed to a flow of two vessels every four hours to take part in the evacuation. The first of these reached Dover on its return trip at 22:30hrs with 1,312

⁷⁹ Ibid, 125-6.

⁸⁰ TNA: CAB 106/258 -

Despatch on operation "Dynamo", the evacuation of the Allied armies from Dunkirk 1940 June, by Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram H. Ramsay, Flag Officer Commanding, Dover (Supplement to London Gazette 38017) (H.M. Stationery Office 1947).

⁸¹ John Grehan, *Dunkirk: Nine Days That Saved An Army* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2018), 71.

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troops being rescued that evening.⁸² Throughout the evacuation the vessels would take the rescued troops to towns on the South Coast of England (Ramsgate, Margate, Hastings, Eastbourne, Newhaven, Brighton, Southampton, Folkestone and Dover⁸³). Upon arrival at the ports, they would be taken by Army-requisitioned trains to inland reception areas, of which there were several prepared, where troops could be rested, re-formed and re-equipped. These reception areas were in army camps in the southwest of England (Aldershot, Tidworth, Warminster, Dorchester, Blandford, Swindon, Oxford, Salisbury and Reading.⁸⁴

It is likely that the evacuation could have started earlier on 26 May had it not been for reports of minelaying. According to a situation report from this day, the ports of Dover and Portsmouth, two of the locations where troops be brought to from Dunkirk, were closed for a while. It was suspected magnetic minelaying by enemy aircraft had taken place during the night of 25 May, while 35 enemy aircraft were reportedly sighted in the Portsmouth area. It was also thought 23 enemy bombers had accompanied the enemy minelayers operating off Portsmouth, though no bombing took place, possibly because of targets being obscured by fog or mist.⁸⁵ The ports soon reopened after no enemy action was discovered. Though it may not have impacted the commencement of Operation Dynamo too significantly, it is likely that it could have led to a delay of its commencement.

May 27 1940, the first full day of the evacuation, did not get off to a good start as the beaches of Dunkirk were shallow, preventing Royal Navy vessels from being able to reach the shores. This prompted the Admiralty to put out a call for smaller ships to carry the troops from the shores to the larger ships that waited a fair distance from the Beaches. These mainly consisted of small craft including coasting Skoots and Motorboats. However, very few inshore craft could be made available during the day and the main effort was therefore concentrated on maintaining a flow of Personnel

⁸² TNA: CAB 106/258 - Despatch on operation "Dynamo", the evacuation of the Allied armies from Dunkirk 1940 June, by Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram H. Ramsay, Flag Officer Commanding, Dover (Supplement to London Gazette 38017) (H.M. Stationery Office 1947).

⁸³ TNA: WO 260/37 - DYNAMO (evacuation of British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk): Movement instructions.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ TNA: ADM 199/2205 – War Diary Summaries: Situation Reports.

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Vessels to Dunkirk at a rate of two every 3½ hours.⁸⁶ It was on this day that the Luftwaffe began their attacks on the evacuation, which were frequent and relentless. This was particularly in the morning and early afternoon, as a War Office telegram mentions there were three attacks between 09.30 and 12.45. The same telegram mentions there were particularly heavy bombings at 10.09 and 11.37, the latter of these having 40 aircraft taking part in the attack.⁸⁷ The Luftwaffe also heavily bombed the town and harbour, resulting in approximately 1000 civilian deaths. The fires that resulted from the bombings became near impossible to put out after the water supply was knocked out in the attack.⁸⁸ Numerous Allied vessels were also damaged or destroyed by the German Air Forces.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, many RAF and Fighter Command craft and sorties combed the skies above Dunkirk, primarily over the sea away from the beaches. They engaged the Luftwaffe in dogfights, protecting the Allied troops and the vessels evacuating them.⁹⁰

The evacuation became a slow process because of the unsuitable nature of the beaches. Fortunately, a solution was found quickly as evacuations were also carried out from two long stone and concrete breakwaters known as the East and West moles. While the moles were not designed to dock ships, they proved invaluable for Operation Dynamo. They were at an ideal length of 1,400 yards and were also hard to see from the air because of the black smoke billowing from nearby oil tankers, allowing for successful embarkations.⁹¹ Despite the day being riddled with problems and disruption attempts, 7,669 soldiers were evacuated on this day.⁹²

On 28 May 1940, the Battle of Belgium ended when what remained of the Belgian Army surrendered to the German Forces after holding out to no avail.⁹³ There was also less Luftwaffe activity over Dunkirk on this day as the Luftwaffe chose to focus their efforts on the Allied Forces' retreats elsewhere, instead of the Evacuation itself.⁹⁴ This

⁸⁶ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards, report on Dunkirk evacuation.

⁸⁷ TNA: WO 106/1607 - Channel ports; defence of Dunkirk, telegram to War Office (27 May 1940).

⁸⁸ Henry Buckton, *Retreat: Dunkirk and the Evacuation of Western Europe*, 136.

⁸⁹ A list of Allied vessels lost on 27 May can be found in Chapter Three.

⁹⁰ Their defensive actions are detailed in Chapter Three.

⁹¹ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 134-6.

⁹² *Ibid*, 120.

⁹³ John Grehan, *Nine Days That Saved An Army*, 99.

⁹⁴ Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Dunkirk: German Operations in France*, 164.

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was also the day when the stranded troops, Royal Navy and the RAF would receive backup from an unlikely source. On 28 May, many British civilians using a variety of craft, around 800 to 1,200 in all, ranging from fishing boats to leisure craft, arrived at the Beaches intending to rescue the trapped BEF soldiers. This unlikely armada would become known as ‘The Little Ships of Dunkirk’ and the arrival of this fleet helped to speed up the Evacuation process. This unlikely fleet would quickly become, as Angus Calder puts it, ‘symbols of plucky resistance to Nazi might.’⁹⁵ The determination of brave civilians to go into a dangerous situation and help with evacuating the troops became the most iconic, which in turn made Dunkirk the iconic success story that it has been mythologised as. On this day, 17,804 troops were evacuated,⁹⁶ a number three and a half times higher than the number evacuated the previous day. This was down to comparatively less Luftwaffe activity and civilian reinforcement, with only a small number of evacuation vessels sunk or damaged.⁹⁷ The situation seemed like it was going in the Allies’ favour. However, there would still be further obstacles that Operation Dynamo would face.

May 29 1940 saw the Luftwaffe focus on the Evacuation effort once again, carrying out heavier raids than they had previously. As a result, many ships were destroyed by aerial attacks, both Naval and requisitioned craft alike.⁹⁸ The Luftwaffe’s bombing raids were relentless, lasting from midday to 8pm, with the RAF being unable to counter all these attacks.⁹⁹ While the RAF continued their mission to protect the evacuation and fend off the invading German forces, their efforts were not enough to prevent the Luftwaffe’s assault against the evacuation process, especially as they were not always able to be present, which the German air force took advantage of.¹⁰⁰ While many vessels were lost, Operation Dynamo made excellent progress. By the end of the day over 47,310 Allied troops had been evacuated.¹⁰¹ Despite the Luftwaffe’s best efforts, they had clearly failed to cause disruption that halted the evacuation, given

⁹⁵ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico Books, 1992), 40.

⁹⁶ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 159.

⁹⁷ A list of evacuation vessels lost on 28 May 1940 can be found in Chapter Three.

⁹⁸ A list of evacuation vessels lost on 29 May 1940 can be found in Chapter Three.

⁹⁹ Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Dunkirk: German Operations in France*, 166.

¹⁰⁰ Further details of this attack, as well as the RAF’s actions and reasons for not being continuously present are detailed in Chapter Three.

¹⁰¹ John Harris, *Dunkirk: The Story of History’s Most Extraordinary Rescue*, 106.

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how this difficult day ended up being the evacuation's most successful day so far. The estimated total of evacuated troops had already been exceeded three and a half days into the evacuation operation.

30 May 1940 had the good fortune of having cloud cover over the beaches, which kept the Luftwaffe activity to a minimum.¹⁰² The German Panzer Divisions were once again ordered to retreat from Dunkirk, adding to this relief; this was because it was starting to be believed that the Panzers were not suited for such an attack.¹⁰³ Once again, exceptional progress was made with the evacuation, with the numbers of those who were rescued on this day totalling 53,823.¹⁰⁴

Cloud cover remained over the beaches on 31 May 1940.¹⁰⁵ In the evening, Gort himself was evacuated, choosing Major-General Harold Alexander, who already commanded the 1st Division, to take command of the BEF's remnants and oversee the rest of the Evacuation.¹⁰⁶ Only one Navy ship was sunk on this day, the minesweeper *Devonian*.¹⁰⁷ However, there were still problems, as a War Office telegram indicates that embarkations were slow in parts of the day due to strong winds and sea swell.¹⁰⁸ However, it is evident that this was not enough to completely hamper operations, as it became Operation Dynamo's most successful day. A total of 68,014 troops were rescued from the beaches.¹⁰⁹ This is an especially impressive total as it was more than double the number of troops estimated to be rescued during the whole evacuation, as it was estimated no more than 30,000 would be evacuated. It is likely the reason for this was an increase in the availability of evacuation vessels that day, as a telegram to the Admiralty that day mentions 'every available ship will be required at Dunkirk during next two hours to evacuate rest of army.'¹¹⁰ This was most likely to combat the slow evacuation progress reported on this day due to the weather conditions.

¹⁰² Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation 1940* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 2012), 89.

¹⁰³ Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Dunkirk: German Operations in France*, 154.

¹⁰⁴ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 224.

¹⁰⁵ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 98.

¹⁰⁶ John Grehan, *Nine Days That Saved An Army*, 220.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 221.

¹⁰⁸ TNA: WO 106/1607 - Channel ports; defence of Dunkirk, telegram to War Office (31 May 1940).

¹⁰⁹ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 261.

¹¹⁰ TNA: WO 106/1613 - Channel ports; evacuation from Dunkirk area, telegram to Admiralty (31 May 1940).

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1 June 1940 became the most destructive day of the evacuation, the beaches of Dunkirk were already under heavy attack in the early hours of the morning. Attacks from the Luftwaffe commenced at 03:50hrs, with heavy shelling reported to have taken place between 22:30hrs on 31 May and 04:20hrs on 1 June. Excellent weather on this day gave the Luftwaffe much visibility for their attacks.¹¹¹ As a result, thirty-one vessels were sunk, which included three Navy destroyers,¹¹² and even one of the moles saw damage because of these airborne attacks. According to a War Diary of the Air Defence Ministry, over 1,000 bombers were reported to be in the Dunkirk area between 05:30hrs and 16:54hrs.¹¹³ Fortunately, such attacks do not appear to have significantly impeded the evacuation as no ships were reported to have entered Dunkirk during the hours that shelling took place, so vessel casualties seemed minimal in these early hours.¹¹⁴ Orders were given for the evacuation to continue until 07:00hrs on 2 June 1940, only using Navy Destroyers, presumably to minimise further vessels being lost.¹¹⁵

An account from Able Seaman Ian Nethercott of the Royal Navy, who served aboard Destroyer HMS Keith, from after one of these attacks gives an idea of the devastation left in its wake;

‘When we first tied up alongside the Mole, we went past a troopship lying on the bottom, burnt out. Next, there was a destroyer which was burnt out, and then there was a gap in the Mole for about 100 yards. Then there were trawlers and sweepers also burnt out. In the middle section, the Mole had been shot away and they’d got a load of planks which the troops had to walk over in single file.’¹¹⁶

This increase in German air attacks would put an end to there being any more daylight evacuations. Despite finding much success on this day, the Luftwaffe ultimately failed to prevent another large number of troops from being rescued, at an impressive total of

¹¹¹ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 108.

¹¹² A list of evacuation vessels lost on 1 June 1940 can be found in Chapter Three.

¹¹³ TNA: ADM 199/2206 - War diary summaries: situation reports.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of France*, 216.

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64,429,¹¹⁷ the second largest daily amount. However, they had succeeded in slowing the evacuations for the last days of Operation Dynamo. According to a telegram from the Admiralty on this day, it had initially been planned to end the evacuation on the night of 1 June 1940.¹¹⁸ However, it would continue until the night of 4 and 5 June due to the large numbers of troops that still needed evacuating. It is likely that this extension of the evacuation was also caused by the significant Luftwaffe activity.

2 June 1940 saw no evacuations during the day to avoid the risk of more attacks from the German Air Forces and not much activity during the day, save for RAF patrols early in the morning and the evening.¹¹⁹ Nightfall at the end of the day and the early hours of 3 June 1940 saw the continuation of the overnight Evacuation of 2 June, with 26,746 troops being rescued.¹²⁰ The process was then stopped at daybreak, leaving tens of thousands of French troops and many British troops who had been wounded. Despite the Navy crews being pushed to their limit for days in a very dangerous situation, the decision was made to make another evacuation attempt on the night of 3-4 June. During the evening, the Coastal Command provided protection between Dunkirk and Dover during the evening until nightfall, when the last evacuation began.¹²¹ This 'last attempt' had some success, with 26,174 soldiers being rescued on the night of 3-4 June.¹²² Following this, the evacuation ended.

By the end of the evacuation, approximately 198,000 British troops and 140,000 French troops had been successfully evacuated, a total of 338,000. This number was much higher than the amount initially anticipated and a feat that was remarkable, given how there had been such little time to organise the evacuation and how the situation had seemed hopeless right before the evacuation. However, what should also be noted is how there were still 68,111 men in the BEF who could not be evacuated, almost 40,000 of whom were still alive and were held as prisoners of war for several years.¹²³ Much valuable artillery and equipment was also left behind. The numbers of these

¹¹⁷ John Harris, *Dunkirk: The Epic Story of History's Most Extraordinary Evacuation*, 165.

¹¹⁸ TNA: WO 106/1613 - Channel ports; evacuation from Dunkirk area, telegram from Admiralty (1 June 1940).

¹¹⁹ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 136.

¹²⁰ John Harris, *Dunkirk*, 172.

¹²¹ Martin Mace, *The Royal Navy at Dunkirk, Commanding Officers' Reports of British Warships in Action During Operation Dynamo* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2017), 475.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Sean Longden, *Dunkirk: The Men They Left Behind* (London: Constable, 2009), 23.

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were very significant, to say the least; 2,472 guns, almost 65,000 vehicles (including all 445 tanks transported from Britain to France), 20,000 motorcycles, 416,000 tons of stores, over 75,000 tons of ammunition and 162,000 tons of petrol.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the RAF lost 106 aircraft during their fights with the Luftwaffe over Dunkirk.¹²⁵ With the BEF and their Allies now out of the picture, the German Armed Forces occupied Dunkirk and were then able to conquer the rest of France with ease, ending with the fall of Paris on June 14. Operation Dynamo may have been successful in what it aimed to do, perhaps resoundingly so, but it was far from a victory, given the significant material losses and how many troops were unable to return.

Aftermath – further evacuations and the loss of France

What could also be intriguing is how Operation Dynamo was not the only evacuation of BEF troops that was carried out around this time. Around 200,000 British and Commonwealth troops were still stranded in France and Churchill felt Britain still had an obligation to help them so two more rescue operations were carried out in June 1940.¹²⁶ These operations appear to have fallen into comparative obscurity compared to Dunkirk, both because they were not as large and due to the public focus being placed entirely on Dunkirk, even though these two further operations also managed to succeed in what they aimed to do in some way. Though the ‘narrative’ created by mythology can give the impression that the evacuation of the BEF ended with Dynamo, the fact was that it was not over yet.

The first of these operations was Operation Cycle, which aimed to evacuate a maximum of 28,000 troops; 18,000 British and 10,000 Allied.¹²⁷ An evacuation fleet of 67 merchant ships and 140 smaller vessels was assembled, while the RAF was tasked with providing protection once again. The first wave of ships arrived on the night of 11 June just off St Valery; however, their approach to the port was hampered by German armed forces, which already occupied the port. Armed with numerous artillery and heavy machine guns, they blocked the evacuation convoy. Because of this, the focus of the evacuation switched eastwards to Veules-les-Roses. Again, the German armed

¹²⁴ Ibid, 23.

¹²⁵ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 243.

¹²⁶ Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 174.

¹²⁷ TNA: WO 222/153 - Report by Brig. H. Edwards and Lt.Col. H. W. Rogers.

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forces occupied the area and attacked the fleets, prematurely ending the evacuation. As a result, only 2,173 British and 1,184 French troops were evacuated, with the remaining 40,000 troops, including approximately 8,000 British soldiers, captured. Although two brigades of the 51st Highland Division were encircled and captured, the evacuations from Le Havre, meanwhile, were more successful, with 11,059 troops being evacuated from the port.¹²⁸

Another major, and more successful, operation was Operation Aerial, the evacuation of remaining Allied forces, civilian refugees from France and BEF equipment from several ports in Western France. These included Cherbourg, St Malo, Brest, St. Nazaire and La Pallice, with the operation later being extended to include ports on the estuary of the River Gironde; Bayonne and St Jean-de-Luz.¹²⁹ Once again, the Navy would provide several vessels to rescue troops and civilians, while the RAF would once again provide protection.¹³⁰ The evacuation phase at Cherbourg took place from 16 to 18 June and ended with 21,600 troops rescued by the Navy over the three days. A total of 21,474 troops would also be evacuated from St Malo from 16 to 17 June, with a hunt for further stragglers also taking place on 18 June. The evacuations from Brest took place from 16 to 17 June, seeing a total of 28,145 British and 4,439 Allied soldiers being rescued. Both the RAF and Royal Navy had an easy task at Brest, as no heavy raids were carried out by the Luftwaffe. Despite enemy aircraft attacks, the evacuation at St Nazaire was still successful, with 13,000 troops being evacuated on the first day. By the end of 19 June, a total of 57,235 troops were evacuated from St Nazaire. Operation Aerial initially ended on 19 June as originally intended; however, a final round of evacuations was carried out after this, as the French armistice became imminent. This time, the evacuation was carried out from the ports of Bayonne and St Jean-de-Luc, focusing on evacuating civilian refugees, staff from Allied embassies and valuable shipping.¹³¹

This operation was not entirely successful. On 18 June, a convoy of ten ships had left, carrying 23,000 men and leaving 4,000 men still to be evacuated. But false intelligence

¹²⁸ Henry Buckton, *Retreat: Dunkirk and the Evacuation of Western Europe*, 162-3.

¹²⁹ Details about the RAF's actions in Operation Cycle can be found in Chapter Three.

¹³⁰ Henry Buckton, *Retreat: Dunkirk and the Evacuation of Western Europe*, 163.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 173-6.

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was given to them, which gave the impression that advancing German forces were closer to the port than they actually were. A convoy of twelve ships was arranged and rescued the last men from the port. However, they left behind much usable equipment that could have been rescued had it not been for the hasty arrangements. Furthermore, during the initial evacuation phase, fewer troops were evacuated from La Pallice, as not many ships were present. As a result, a fleet of cargo ships had to be requisitioned by the Navy for use between 17-18 June, although several more ships from the official evacuation fleet arrived on 19 June. Approximately 5,300 troops were rescued from this port by the end of 19 June. Despite the debacle with La Pallice and the false intelligence, the Royal Navy had once again managed to actively rescue many Allied troops, a total of 191,870 for both Operation Cycle and Aerial. As with Dunkirk and Operation Cycle, the RAF was once again active providing defence to the troops being evacuated and the vessels evacuating them.¹³² During this operation, there would be only one significant Navy casualty, which was troopship HMT Lancastria, which was carrying thousands of troops, RAF personnel and civilians. The ship sank very quickly, but nearby vessels fortunately went to its rescue and managed to save 2,455 of its passengers and crew, all while the air attack from above persisted.¹³³ The sinking of the Lancastria became the greatest loss of life to have happened on a British ship. The true death toll remains unknown, but it is estimated to be 3,500.¹³⁴ Despite the problems faced with both evacuations, such as the significant loss of HMS Lancastria and, particularly the case with Operation Cycle, not being able to rescue the number of troops planned, both operations succeeded in the long run, playing a part in keeping the British Army intact.

As well as being tasked with protecting Operations Cycle and Aerial like with Operation Dynamo, the RAF continued to be in active in France until the Battle concluded in June 1940. Fighter Command, Bomber Command and the AASF continued to attack strategic points in France, including Seine and Somme River crossings, troop concentrations, enemy communication points and rail marshalling yards, all with the aim of halting, or at least slowing down, their advance across the

¹³² Details of the RAF's actions at Operation Aerial can be found in Chapter Three.

¹³³ Sean Longden, *Dunkirk: The Men They Left Behind*, 83.

¹³⁴ Henry Buckton, *Retreat: Dunkirk and the Evacuation of Western Europe*, 173-6.

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northern coast. While losing a significant number of aircraft and crews, they also had some successes in their offensives against these targets, to the point where they may have been able to slow down their advance, allowing for Operations Aerial and Cycle to happen. However, these efforts were clearly not enough to prevent the occupation of France.¹³⁵

On June 22, France officially surrendered with Henri Petain signing an armistice with the Nazis at Compiègne. Following this, France was split into two halves, one was annexed by Germany and the other was placed in the hands of their French rulers, who were now merely 'puppets' under the rule of the Nazis, which saw the German implementation of the Vichy Government. This lasted until June 6 1944 when the liberation of Western Europe began shortly after the successful Normandy landings.

The Myth of Dunkirk

It did not take long for the Dunkirk evacuations to rise to fame. The evacuation was mostly carried out in secret, one that was kept from French allies for two days and for four days from the British public. When news came out about Dunkirk, the British media were quick to report on it, with aid from a military that wanted to avoid criticism.¹³⁶ This determination to evade criticism most likely stems from the defeat the BEF faced in mainland Europe and wanting to avoid mass concern amongst the public, especially as it was felt, in both Britain and mainland Europe, that the social control of a panicked population could become problematic. With Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland and France falling in such rapid succession, it is easy to see why this felt to be the case. Even before the war, there appeared to have been a reluctance of the Government to trust the public, which saw the creation of the Ministry of Information. Plans to form the Ministry took place in 1935 with Sir Stephen Tallents, an expert in public relations, appointed as its Director-General Designate. The aim of this Ministry was to test the state's ability to mobilize the nation for war and to create a sense of unity of purpose among the British people. With newspaper readership being higher

¹³⁵ Further details about the RAF's activity during this period can be found in Chapter Three.

¹³⁶ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: Myth and Popular Memory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 38-40

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than ever before and the development of film and radio, the Ministry had numerous methods at its disposal.¹³⁷

As soon as details of the evacuation became public, various newspapers immediately began to report on the evacuation. All of these reported on its successful outcome, the heroism of the BEF and the civilians that had gone to rescue them and attacks carried out against the enemy, painting a picture of a triumphant victory. The Daily News of London on 29 May 1940 reported ‘the enemy lost during the day 91 planes of which 63 were brought down in air fighting and 11 by anti-aircraft guns. At one enemy airfield 15 enemy aircraft were destroyed on the ground’¹³⁸ as well as ‘our air forces bombed Ostend, Dunkirk, Neuport and Blankenberghe and the roads and railroads leading to these ports and their harbours... between Calais and Dover an enemy destroyer was hit with a heavy bomb.’¹³⁹ The Daily Express, on May 31 1940, reported heavily on the evacuation, with its front page filled with titles including ‘through an inferno of bombs and shells the BEF is crossing the Channel from Dunkirk – in history’s strangest armada... ships of all sizes dare the German guns’,¹⁴⁰ ‘tens of thousands safely home already’ and ‘many more coming by day and night’,¹⁴¹ and ‘tired, dirty, hungry they [the BEF] came back – unbeatable’.¹⁴² Although it does not ignore losses faced on this day, as it reports on how three Navy Destroyers had been lost, this front page was clearly determined to focus on the heroics of Dunkirk. Under the headline ‘Dunkirk Defence Defies 300,000’ the front page of the Daily Sketch on 3 June 1940 reported on how ‘four-fifths’ of the BEF had been saved.¹⁴³ The Daily Mail reported on June 4 1940 how ‘British and French troops holding Dunkirk’s defence ring have repeatedly counterattacked in their fight to gain time for the evacuation of yet more men. Their counterattack with artillery and rifles was made not so much to regain ground as to maintain positions and smash German pressure, thus enabling units awaiting embarkation to get away.’¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Ibid, 31.

¹³⁸ ‘Allies Face Situation and Continue to Fight’, *Daily News (London)*, 29 May 1940.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Tens of Thousands Safely Home Already’, *Daily Express*, 31 May 1940.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ ‘Dunkirk Defence 300,000’, *Daily Sketch*, 3 June 1940.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Allied Attacks Beat Back Nazis’, *Daily Mail*, 4 June 1940.

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The Manchester Guardian on June 1 1940 reported how the beach of Dunkirk ‘was, and is, the place to which the isolated but unbroken men came to wait their turn for the ships which came through shell fire and bombing to rescue them.’¹⁴⁵ It also reported how ‘many of the men have spent two or three or four days on this beach, hiding in hollows scratched in the sand or in communal dug-outs in the dunes from the German planes which have scourged them with bomb and machine-guns’¹⁴⁶ yet were still maintaining discipline and holding out, mentioning ‘units have been told off to look after ‘beach organisation’ and to detail men for embarkation whenever one of the gallant destroyers moors beside the jetty.’¹⁴⁷

Local newspapers were also quick to report on the heroics of the evacuation. For example, the Hull Daily Mail on 29 May 1940 described the British Army as still being ‘intact’ after their retreat to the coast of France.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Manchester Evening News on 30 May 1940 described the Allied troops as being ‘powerfully entrenched’ and ‘unbroken in face of overwhelming odds.’¹⁴⁹ The Newcastle Journal on June 5 1940 also reported how ‘more than 335,000 British and French soldiers had been carried ‘out of the Jaws of Death’¹⁵⁰’.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill was also particularly vocal about the successes of Dunkirk, in what is perhaps a sharp contrast to concerns he had earlier when he realised the BEF would need to be evacuated from France. ‘A miracle of deliverance, achieved by valour, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by conquerable fidelity’¹⁵¹ he said after the completion of Dynamo. He is even known to have said how ‘there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted.’¹⁵² Churchill was perhaps the most influential person in Britain at the time and his words would have therefore been a great source of inspiration. Following the evacuation, Churchill also gave his iconic ‘we shall never surrender’ speech to the House of Commons, a speech that the Daily Mirror on 5 June 1940 reported it was ‘the

¹⁴⁵ ‘The Miracle of the BEF’s return – Majority of force will be Saved: Stories of the Ordeal on Dunkirk Beach’, *The Guardian*, 1 June 1940

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ ‘BEF Still Intact, Withdraw Some Miles Towards Coast’, *Hull Daily News*, 29 May 1940.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Dunkirk is powerfully entrenched’, *Manchester Evening News*, 30 May 1940.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Last Scenes of Dunkirk Miracle’, *Newcastle Journal*, June 5 1940.

¹⁵¹ TNA: CAB 21/118 – Registered Files of the War Office Committee.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

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greatest speech ever made by a Prime Minister in Britain.’¹⁵³ The same newspaper even reported how ‘a roar of cheers answered his superb, stark confidence.’¹⁵⁴ This speech of Britain’s determination to never surrender to Nazi Germany clearly became inspirational from the start and the Dunkirk evacuation, which had only ended the day before, be it through Ministry of Information reports or word of mouth, evidently would have provided the public with an excellent example of this.

Such reporting on the evacuation combined with its uniqueness led to Dunkirk leaving behind an incredible legacy that has endured to this day. An aspect of the evacuation that quickly became renowned was the bravery and resilience of those involved in the evacuation, soldier and civilian alike; something remembered throughout the years. Signaller Alfred Baldwin, one of the many thousands of troops evacuated, remembers the calm nature of the troops being evacuated; ‘you had the impression of people standing waiting for a bus. There was no pushing or shoving’¹⁵⁵. Despite being right in the middle of a life and death situation, they still put a brave face and pulled together. An account from Captain Anthony Rhodes, 253 Field Commander of the Royal Engineers, also shows that such order was maintained even when they would come under Luftwaffe attack;

‘Where they [boats] came in, there was a little nucleus of men and a great queue running from the dunes behind, perhaps a quarter of a mile long. Nobody told us what to do, but it seemed the decent thing to get into the queue and no try to jump it.’¹⁵⁶

The bravery of the Allied troops awaiting rescue and of the civilians who journeyed into a warzone, combined with the efforts of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force all turned what had been, in Churchill’s words, a ‘colossal military disaster’¹⁵⁷ into a ‘miracle of deliverance’¹⁵⁸ all within a relatively short time. This created the idea of ‘Dunkirk Spirit’, a term that has endured over many years, used to describe situations where people have pulled together in difficult situations and used as an iconic symbol

¹⁵³ ‘Allied Attacks Beat Back Nazis’, *Daily Mirror*, 5 June 1940.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain*, 197.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 197

¹⁵⁷ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 362.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 358.

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of British Spirit. Of particular interest is an article by the Express in May 2020, which talks about the 80th anniversary of the Dunkirk evacuation and also talks about how ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ would help get people through the Covid-19 pandemic. It makes an interesting comparison to Dunkirk

‘Perhaps the greatest symbol of the Dunkirk spirit is the 850 small ships which sailed across the Channel to rescue the stranded army... many [of the boats] were taken across by private citizens desperate to do their bit... so the Dunkirk spirit encapsulates a collective effort which shows that however small your contribution is, it is magnified when put together with the efforts of others... we have seen this in recent weeks with the more than three million volunteers, the countless acts of kindness, the respect for social distancing and much more that have brought the infection rate under control’¹⁵⁹

This statement serves as a prime example of how, even decades after the Dunkirk evacuations, the notion of ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ continues to be relevant many decades after Operation Dynamo.

As well as the resilience and determination of the BEF at Dunkirk, a component that has become the most iconic are The Little Ships of Dunkirk. This unlikely armada of civilian vessels manned by many brave civilians who were determined to help bring the stranded troops back home is what has made Dunkirk such a unique event of the Second World War. Their role involved sailing directly to the beaches of Dunkirk and rescuing BEF soldiers by either ferrying them to the Navy craft or taking them all the way back to Britain’s shores. In the years following the evacuation, efforts have been made to ensure these actions are remembered and commemorated. In 1965, the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships was founded for owners of the vessels and organises a memorial crossing of many of these surviving Little Ships every five years, escorted by the Royal Navy.¹⁶⁰ Efforts have also been made to ensure as many of the surviving Little Ships as possible are preserved, as a means of ensuring their legacy.

¹⁵⁹ ‘Dunkirk Spirit is with us and will see us through Coronavirus’, *The Express*, May 24 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/1286471/coronavirus-news-dunkirk-eightieth-anniversary>

¹⁶⁰ The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships (2021) - <https://www.adls.org.uk/>

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The Dunkirk Little Ships Restoration Trust was established as a registered charity in 1993, with the aim being to preserve and restore Dunkirk Little Ships. They have restored many of these ships, some of which are used for display, while some now enjoy a new lease of life under new ownership.¹⁶¹

Dunkirk's legacy has also endured through film and television. One of the most significant examples of this is the 2017 film 'Dunkirk', directed by Christopher Nolan. It is evident the filmmakers wanted to portray the evacuation as accurately as possible, evident by the decision to shoot the Dunkirk scenes on location at the actual beach, numerous army, RAF and civilian testimonies being used and colourised photographs being used for the set designs.¹⁶² Nearly sixty years before this was another film focusing on Dunkirk, 1958's *Dunkirk*. While the level of filmmaking would be very different to the 2017 film, particularly as it was filmed entirely in Kent. It also aims to tell the story of Dunkirk through a visual medium. Especially as it is based on a novel called *Dunkirk* which was co-written by Lt. Colonel Ewan Butler and Major J.S. Bradford and tells the story of Dunkirk from the perspectives of people who were involved. Though both films differ from each other, they clearly had the same intention of telling the story of the Dunkirk evacuation visually, making sure this event is remembered for generations. The events of Dunkirk have been featured in numerous films, television programs and documentaries throughout the years, but these two are perhaps the most significant, given the lengths they went to show and tell their audiences about the events of the evacuation and how the 'Dunkirk Spirit' prevailed.

Deserving though the Dunkirk evacuation is of leaving behind a legacy, it was a unique event of the Second World War, what this legacy appears to have done is created a myth: a myth that the evacuation was a triumphant victory despite all the odds against it. The severity of the Allies' defeat and certain events before and after, significantly the loss of France as a valuable ally and Nazi Germany gaining dominance in mainland Europe, have been comparatively obscured by the evacuation's successes. The only reason Operation Dynamo needed to happen was because of the launch of the Blitzkrieg on 10 May 1940, which found the BEF at the mercy of a very one-sided assault. Whether or not the blame can be put down to miscommunications on

¹⁶¹ The Dunkirk Little Ships Restoration Trust - <http://www.dlsrt.org.uk/Layout.htm>.

¹⁶² Joshua Levine, *Dunkirk, The History behind the Major Motion Picture* (London: Collins, 2017), 270.

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the Allies' part, the quiet period of September 1939 to May 1940 being taken for granted or just the sheer power of the Blitzkrieg, the BEF were hopelessly outmatched.

Within a short space of time, fortresses and defence lines believed to be impenetrable were destroyed or bypassed and Luxembourg, Netherlands and Belgium had fallen to France. Within two weeks, the German armed forces had the BEF cornered at Dunkirk and it was only through fortunate circumstance, Luftwaffe having priorities elsewhere and Panzer Division being ordered to halt, that an evacuation was able to commence. It also seems likely that things could have played out differently for the evacuation had the weather not been as good as it mostly was during Operation Dynamo. Julian Thompson makes an interesting point regarding this;

‘The only miraculous element in the operation was the weather: gales and high seas would have allowed far fewer troops to be taken off – probably none from the beaches, and drastically fewer from the seaward side of the East Mole’¹⁶³

Even then, assaults from the Luftwaffe continued against the evacuation process were almost continuous once it started, which saw numerous Navy and civilian vessels sunk or destroyed and even forcing the last stages of the evacuation to take place at night, so it would not become an easy target. Even though the evacuation did succeed in evacuating a large number of troops, there were thousands of troops left behind as well as a significant amount of valuable army equipment and ammunition. Two more evacuation attempts were made in June 1940 which succeeded in rescuing more troops, but they were still unable to prevent many troops from being left behind and taken as prisoner of war. It was during these further evacuations that the Royal Navy suffered its greatest loss, with the sinking of the HMS *Lancastria*, resulting in thousands killed. Soon after this, France surrendered and, although the country would not be fully occupied until 1942, June 1940 saw the formation of the Nazi-run Vichy government. France had fallen and Britain had lost a valuable ally at that point in the war. Even Winston Churchill, who had been full of praise about Dunkirk and perhaps has some responsibility for the development of the myth of Dunkirk being a triumph had acknowledged that Dunkirk was certainly not a victory. He was known to have said in

¹⁶³ Julian Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory*, 208.

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a speech on June 4 1940 ‘we must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attribute of a victory, wars are not won by evacuations.’¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

Even if it had succeeded in evacuating larger than anticipated numbers of troops, Operation Dynamo was not a victory by any means. This can be summed up by this statement by Sebag-Montefiore; ‘notwithstanding all the praise lavished on those whose Dunkirk spirit made the evacuation a success, it should not be forgotten that the campaign represented a disaster for the British Army.’¹⁶⁵ The only immediate impact of Operation Dynamo was being able to rescue much of the British Army and return them to Britain. The Battles of Belgium, France, Boulogne and Calais still remained as defeats for the Allies.

Though Operation Dynamo itself was certainly not a victory, it still likely paved the way for Allied victory later on in the Second World War. As historian Robert Jackson argues;

‘The evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk made a greater impact on the British nation than any other military operation, before or since... the biggest single defeat ever suffered by British arms, grew the shoots of later victory.’¹⁶⁶

Indeed, later victories for Britain followed Dunkirk. Following the success of the Blitzkrieg, and perhaps being more determined to occupy Britain following the events of Dunkirk, Hitler would then set his sights on invading Britain and drew up plans for an invasion. This led to the Battle of Britain from June to October 1940, from which Britain emerged victorious.¹⁶⁷ The Dunkirk evacuations appear to have strengthened the resolve of the British Army, as this comment from Robert Jackson indicates;

‘From this awareness, as the battered divisions were reformed and refitted in England to meet an invasion that never came, arose a determination to see this fight through... it would be a long, uphill struggle: but these men,

¹⁶⁴ Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, 86.

¹⁶⁵ Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk Fight to the Last Man*, 65.

¹⁶⁶ Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation*, 137.

¹⁶⁷ The events of the Battle of Britain are spoken about in Chapter Four.

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with the thousands who were to follow them and the direction of the senior commanders who had slipped through the German net, would later redeem the succession of disasters that seemed never ending.’¹⁶⁸

The evacuations allowed the Army to remain largely intact and would allow for successful conflicts during the Second World War. An example of this is the North Africa Campaign from 1941 to 1943 when Britain fought against the armed forces of Germany and Italy, the most powerful ally to Germany in the Second World War, in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. This campaign was successful for Britain, resulting in Italy losing its African colonies. Another was the Italian Campaign from 1943 to 1945, which saw Allied forces invade and occupy Italy, resulting in the defeat of Mussolini and Germany losing a powerful ally. However, the most significant of these was the Normandy Landings in June 1944, now known as D-Day. This saw Britain launch a campaign in France and Germany which proved much more successful than the initial BEF campaign and led to the Allies being the victors of the Second World War in Europe.

As well as potentially leading to future, the evacuations were a key moment and turning point for the Second World War in Europe. As well as invading and occupying mainland Europe, Germany aimed to defeat the British at Dunkirk in the hopes that they would surrender and negotiate an exit from the War. While they unquestionably succeeded in pushing them back across Belgium and France, they had failed to force them to surrender or significantly deplete its Army. It is likely that the planners of the evacuation and the Admiralty running the evacuation were aware that Dunkirk’s success would prove a turning point for the war in Europe and vital for later successes in the war. A telegram from 31 May 1940 requesting for enemy shelling to be targeted labels Dunkirk as being ‘our only real hope.’¹⁶⁹ This brief but effective statement can sum up just how important it would be for them if Operation Dynamo would prove to be a successful mission.

Despite how myth and public memory may have exaggerated Dunkirk’s triumphs, Operation Dynamo was still an achievement. The fact such an evacuation was arranged

¹⁶⁸ Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation*, 137.

¹⁶⁹ TNA: WO 106/1613 - Channel ports; evacuation from Dunkirk area, telegram from Admiralty (31 May 1940).

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in what was a small amount of time, commencing a mere sixteen days after the Blitzkrieg, is quite remarkable. As well as his comment regarding Dunkirk's success being due to good circumstances, Thompson gives praise to the remarkable evacuation efforts and the small timescale in which it happened;

‘There had only been less than a week to plan, and further no one could predict the scale of Operation Dynamo with any certainty... even if almost everyone made it, an evacuation of this magnitude was not just a matter of everyone slogging back to the coast and expecting it all to happen.’¹⁷⁰

Thompson adds more to his praise of the evacuation, arguing that Operation Dynamo was a feat that could not be pulled off in the present day; the shipping allocated to Ramsay for Operation Dynamo was of a magnitude inconceivable today after over sixth years of erosion of British maritime power.¹⁷¹

What is even more incredible, and what made the evacuation a successful operation, are the numbers that were evacuated. Clearly, when the evacuations were being planned the situation appeared hopeless. It was estimated that no more than approximately 30,000 troops, out of the hundreds of thousands that were trapped in France at the time, could be evacuated. However, the final total more than exceeded these expectations, with 338,000 troops rescued from Dunkirk. Despite the best efforts of the German forces to stop the BEF from escaping Dunkirk, they failed to prevent most of them from returning to Britain.

Operation Dynamo was certainly not a victory for the Allies and was not a triumph either. It failed to prevent France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands from falling to the Nazis, it was not able to rescue the entirety of the BEF and could not prevent much valuable ammunition and equipment being lost to the BEF. It also demonstrated the power that mythology has to create perspectives of events and influence the public memory; it turned the product of a military disaster into a triumphant event. Angus Calder made an interesting point regarding myth;

‘[Mythology] adapted itself to events with remarkable ‘naturalness’ and fluency, and stories were generated with such success that we, born since,

¹⁷⁰ Julian Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory*, 164.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 165.

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have ignored how frightening and confusing the period from April 1940 through to June 1941 was for the British people. Perhaps we simply cannot comprehend that fear and confusion imaginatively. Myth stands in our way, asserting itself, abiding no question.’¹⁷²

This point can apply to Dunkirk to a certain extent, as it is the heroics and achievements of Dunkirk that have mainly been remembered. Though the reason for the evacuation being necessary is far from forgotten in this same memory, the extent to which the Allies were defeated in May 1940 does appear to have been overshadowed. At the same time, however, the legacy it left behind is not undeserving. Operation Dynamo did succeed in rescuing as many BEF troops as possible, many more than had been anticipated, and allowed Britain to keep a strong army, even paving the way for future Allied victories. It is clear, overall, that, despite being the product of a catastrophic Allied defeat, the Dunkirk evacuation was a success that emerged from the same defeat.

While this chapter has established the evacuations as being a success, there is still the question of who and what the real reason was for the success of these evacuations. Before this question can be answered, however, it is worth talking about how myth and memory comparatively obscured a component of the evacuation – the role of the RAF; a component which could have been just as crucial to Dunkirk’s success.

¹⁷² Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, 32.

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Chapter 2 - 'Where were the RAF?': Criticisms of the RAF at Dunkirk

Introduction

As the previous chapter established, the Royal Air Force (RAF) was active at Dunkirk during Operation Dynamo and was pivotal to the evacuation. They protected the troops on the beaches and the civilian and Navy vessels that were rescuing them. What the previous chapter also established was how myth had formed a narrative about Dunkirk being a triumph and how this was down to the bravery of the soldiers on the beaches patiently awaiting rescue and the brave civilians who bravely manned vessels of all kinds into a warzone to aid the evacuation. With all this focus on the brave soldiers and civilian vessels, as well as the Navy to an extent, the RAF seems to have been largely ignored within this narrative. Though their presence was acknowledged, there does not appear to have been as much praise directed towards the RAF as there was for the BEF, Little Ships of Dunkirk and the Navy. More intriguingly, there was a perceived RAF absence by many people present at Dunkirk. This chapter aims to explore this perceived absence of the RAF from Dunkirk, including the possible reasons for such perceptions. Also examined will be the various criticisms the RAF faced for their apparent 'no show' and how this tainted their reputation at Dunkirk, potentially obscuring the part that they played. Additionally, evidence of RAF activity will be explored, evidence which should have dispelled any myths and rumours of RAF absence yet didn't. What will also be examined will be the power that popular memory can have and how this tainted the reputation of the RAF to a certain extent, as well as how this could have played a part in the role of the RAF being comparatively obscured in the common 'narrative' of Dunkirk that the myth of 1940 formed.

Criticisms against the RAF

Despite the significant role played by the RAF, their perceived absence from Dunkirk led to a significant amount of resentment towards them by much of the British Army. The apparent lack of RAF craft seen, combined with the stress and panic faced by Allied troops, led to a great deal of resentment towards the RAF from the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF). This resentment is demonstrated in this account from Sergeant Major Martin McLane of the 2nd Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry,

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from at least several decades after the war, who gave a very condemning view of the RAF during Operation Dynamo;

‘The RAF did a very poor job of defending us. The Germans were working in close co-operation. When they wanted support, they called in their dive-bombers and their fighters who started and bombed us. And what support did we have? We had no damn thing at all. Not a bloody thing. We were just left to God and good neighbours’¹⁷³

This scornful account of how the RAF had, in McLane’s eyes, done a bad job at defending soldiers on the beaches is typical of how much resentment the BEF troops had of the RAF. This even led to RAF personnel who ended up on the beaches and evacuated back to Britain being scorned by BEF troops; an example of this is found in Alan Deere’s account of the evacuation;

‘The troops were very anti... asking “where the hell were you?”... it was a bit unpleasant because I was the only airman on board – but you couldn’t blame them, they were pretty worn out’¹⁷⁴

Gunner Sidney Fowler, also evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk, gives an account of the evacuation, which includes another negative opinion of the RAF;

‘Only there about an hour when a dive-bombing attack began in which about 25 planes took part. This they kept up for about an hour, in which they set on fire three ships also machine gunning the rest... [we] managed to get into a squad ready to go aboard ship. Went off the sand under the N.C.O, when two of our Spitfires came over; these were the first English planes we had seen – and the last. From what I had seen at Dunkirk and La Panne, I remember that old saying “thank God we got a Navy” and believe me it was true; the RAF didn’t help us much. After those planes had circled round twice they made off for England. They had not been gone five

¹⁷³ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of France* (London: Ebury Press, 233).

¹⁷⁴ Spitfire Ace who crash-landed at Dunkirk (29 July 2017) - <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/daily-mail/20170729/282484298835555>.

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minutes when out of the clouds appeared the Hun, about the same as before, again making an attack on the ships.’¹⁷⁵

This account is similar to that of Martin McLane. Like McLane, he criticises the RAF for not helping the evacuating soldiers at Dunkirk and speaks about how the German Luftwaffe was given the freedom to roam the skies above. He does, however, acknowledge the RAF’s presence in some way, albeit mentioning that their presence was brief, and they were not present to defend their troops on the ground at crucial moments.

It must be remembered that although the RAF did see a lot of action at Dunkirk, their patrols and dogfights primarily took place at a distance from the evacuation, over the English Channel. Inevitably, this meant their battles would have been unseen by the troops on the beaches. Furthermore, there would regularly be absences of fighter cover for periods of up to an hour and a half. It is likely that this was down to the RAF having several disadvantages, including issues of fuel consumption. Richard Mitchell, a sergeant in the RAF 229 Squadron, gives an insight into how he and his squadron rarely ever reached Dunkirk despite making regular patrols;

‘We’d set off from Biggin Hill just as it was getting light and we’d do three trips to Dunkirk by ten o’clock in the morning. There were just four of us and we weren’t battle-hardened at all and I think it was the worst period of the war. We had a little field telephone and when it rang, we all thought that they must be sending us back to base but when he put the phone down, the CO [Commanding Officer] said, ‘come on chaps, we’ve got to go again’. Most of the time, we didn’t reach Dunkirk. We attacked bombers or we were attacked on the way there.’¹⁷⁶

There was also the problem of a lack of long-distance radar. RAF operations at and around Dunkirk were outside the range of interceptions from radars in Britain. This often led to RAF squadrons being sent over without a clear picture of the situation, most likely leading to them being absent during crucial moments.¹⁷⁷ It is possible this

¹⁷⁵ Gunner Sidney Fowler’s account of the Dunkirk Evacuation - http://www.historyofwar.org/sources/wwII/fowler_dunkirk.html.

¹⁷⁶ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of France*, 233.

¹⁷⁷ Further details can be found in Chapter Three.

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could have been the case on 29 May and 1 June 1940 when there were heavy bombings carried out by the Luftwaffe over Dunkirk.¹⁷⁸

The Luftwaffe generally had more resources, with around 2,000 aircraft at its disposal at Dunkirk and hundreds more waiting in the skies to strike the Royal Navy ships and men awaiting rescue.¹⁷⁹ By contrast, the RAF patrols at Dunkirk were initially smaller than the Luftwaffe's formations due to limited resources. The Luftwaffe had forty craft on average for each formation, compared to the RAF's average of twelve. This led to the RAF often being outnumbered by four to one, and many more sightings of the Luftwaffe at Dunkirk, which would have further given the impression the RAF was doing little to help defend the beaches.¹⁸⁰ An account by Pilot Officer Michael Lyne of RAF 19 Squadron demonstrates just how much bigger the Luftwaffe's squadrons were compared to those of the RAF; '...we saw ahead, going towards Calais where the Rifle Brigade was holding out, about 40 German aircraft. We were 12.'¹⁸¹

From 1 June until the evacuation ended on 4 June, it was decided that the evacuation would only proceed during the night, there being less chance at that time of the evacuations being attacked by the German forces. As a result, the RAF and Fighter Command decided to only concentrate their patrols around dusk or dawn to provide cover for the ships evacuating the troops. Again, this led to an absence of RAF craft over the beaches during the day, which would have drawn more unfavourable comments from the troops on the ground.

It is also worth noting that the RAF had also made other contributions around this time. The RAF Coastal Command would fly patrols across shipping routes, patrol the Belgian and Dutch coasts for enemy naval activity and would undertake bombing raids there if need be. Patrols would also be flown to prevent interference from German submarines, U-Boats and E-Boats, the latter of these would have had a particularly significant threat to the evacuation. The RAF's Coastal Command's patrols would reduce the amount of disruption to the evacuation, making the movement of E-Boats

¹⁷⁸ Details of these attacks can be found in Chapters One and Three.

¹⁷⁹ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk: The RAF and Luftwaffe during Operation Dynamo, 26 May – June 1940* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 260.

¹⁸⁰ Norman Franks, *The Air Battle of Dunkirk* (London: William Kimber and Co. Ltd, 1983), 140.

¹⁸¹ 19 Squadron: The Spitfire Pilots who defended Dunkirk - <https://www.historyhit.com/19-squadron-the-spitfire-pilots-who-defended-the-dunkirk-evacuation/>.

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difficult on the Dutch Coast during daylight, therefore preventing them from heading to Dunkirk. RAF Bomber Command would also make attacks on numerous targets with tactical importance that were away from Dunkirk. These would include German motor convoys and rail yards that were bringing up supplies for the German forces at Dunkirk.¹⁸² This would allow RAF forces to impede the progress of the German armed forces indirectly. While this greatly benefitted the evacuation, it would have inevitably meant less aircraft could be present at Dunkirk, perhaps fuelling this perceived RAF absence further.

As well as more resources, the Luftwaffe gained another advantage over the RAF, as historian Norman Franks points out;

‘It would seem logical to suppose that the Germans would have had air observers behind Dunkirk who would at such moments be able to call-up their aircraft to come into the battle zone... as the Luftwaffe rapidly took over recently evacuated French and Belgian airfields, it was able to put more sorties over Dunkirk and its aircraft could be turned around more quickly.’¹⁸³

As a result of this, the British army on the beaches and Navy gunners are said to have shot indiscriminately at anything which flew overhead, especially as there even appeared to be rumours circulating Dunkirk of German Luftwaffe pilots requisitioning downed RAF craft, as a crewman aboard the Thames paddle-wheeler *Golden Eagle* recalls ‘every time a Hurricane or Spitfire came low over the beach we opened fire because we had heard some had been captured by the Germans and were firing on the squaddies.’¹⁸⁴

As well as utilising its own fleet of aircraft, the RAF Coastal Command also borrowed several Skuas from the Fleet Air Arm to bolster its daily patrols.¹⁸⁵ Skuas were the primary aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm; as a result, they are said to have been largely unfamiliar to both the RAF and the French *Armée de L’air*. As much as the Allied aircraft appeared to be unidentifiable at times, it is plausible that those on the ground,

¹⁸² TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Trafford's papers.

¹⁸³ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 142.

¹⁸⁴ James Hayward, *Myths and Legends of the Second World War* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2009), 70.

¹⁸⁵ John Terraine, *The Right of the Line, The Role of The RAF in World War Two* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), 61.

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be they Army or civilian, could also have trouble telling them apart from the Luftwaffe. Robert Jaffa, a private who served with the 11th Casualty Clearing Station, recalls an occasion at Dunkirk where several British fighters flew over the beaches and were evidently mistaken for Luftwaffe aircraft as ‘every gun on the beach opened upon them’.¹⁸⁶ Arthur Joscelyn, a civilian who was aboard the Thames Barge Shannon and involved in the evacuation, also recalls ‘every time we heard a plane, we thought we were going to get bombed’,¹⁸⁷ further indicating how RAF craft could have been mistaken for Luftwaffe aircraft.

The air over the beaches was also very dirty: smoke from the burning oil tankers and ships would cover the skies, making it very difficult for any aircraft to be seen from down below. Pilot Officer Michael Lyne of RAF 19 Squadron remembers the smoke billowing over Dunkirk’ ‘On 26 May we were called upon to patrol over the beaches as a single squadron. I will always remember heading off to the east and seeing the column of black smoke from the Dunkirk oil storage tanks. We patrolled for some time without seeing any aircraft.’¹⁸⁸

Sid Lewis, a soldier in the BEF at Dunkirk, mentions how the smoke at Dunkirk was a prominent aspect of the evacuation while he was there;

‘Thousands of men thronged the beach and the crowd seemed to stretch all along the coast to Dunkirk, marked out by the huge columns of smoke that never seemed to get any smaller. They were a permanent fixture, like the sea or the dunes.’¹⁸⁹

RAF fighter pilot Alan Deere of 54 Squadron, who crash-landed at Dunkirk and was evacuated from there, also recalls the smokescreen caused by the burning wreckage and how much of it there was; ‘...from miles away you could tell where Dunkirk was... it was completely overcast by black smoke’¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ IWM SR 32527 – Oral History: Robert Jaffa (Royal Army Medical Corps).

¹⁸⁷ IWM SR 9768 – Oral History: Arthur Joscelyne (British Civilian Sailor).

¹⁸⁸ 19 Squadron: The Spitfire Pilots who defended Dunkirk - <https://www.historyhit.com/19-squadron-the-spitfire-pilots-who-defended-the-dunkirk-evacuation/>

¹⁸⁹ Mike Rossiter, *I Fought at Dunkirk* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2012), 288.

¹⁹⁰ Spitfire Ace who crash-landed at Dunkirk (29 July 2017) - <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/daily-mail/20170729/282484298835555>.

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Even when smoke was not covering the skies over Dunkirk, there would still be heavy cloud cover some of the time, which would also have made it near impossible to see any aircraft from the ground level. A report from the Commander of HMS Montrose, from 2 June 1940, speaks about how the RAF's actions over Dunkirk could not always be seen; 'the weather was calm and fine on the way across, with fairly high clouds. At one period, a tremendous air battle was heard going on above the clouds but none of the actual fighting was seen'.¹⁹¹ Flying above the cloud was often an RAF tactic that would be used against the Luftwaffe, to give them a greater advantage. It would be a tactic that also worked against them, given how it would reduce the visibility of the RAF from the ground and be a factor that resulted in them receiving the amount of criticism they did.

Similarly, James Louis Moulton, Commanding Officer for 48RM Commando, recalls an instance when he saw signs of a possible dogfight between RAF and Luftwaffe forces. While he does not recollect seeing RAF aircraft during the period of Operation Dynamo, he does remember seeing smoke overhead and the sound of machine guns, followed by a Messerschmitt 109 diving down; from this, he 'could tell that something was going on'.¹⁹² This was most likely RAF fighter aircraft fighting Luftwaffe aircraft. Both accounts indicate that even when no RAF craft was visible above the beaches, there were signs that they were present over the beaches.

Additionally, testimony from Flying Officer Harold Bird-Wilson of RAF 17 Squadron does imply that the RAF should have been easily sighted at Dunkirk;

'They [the Army] said they never saw the RAF fighters over Dunkirk, which surprised us greatly, because we had two patrols over Dunkirk per squadron per day from dawn to dusk, whether we were actually over the town or inland, trying to intercept the enemy. We protected the beaches considerably, making continuous patrols throughout the hours of daylight'.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ TNA: ADM 199/786 - Operation Dynamo: Evacuation of troops from Dunkirk.

¹⁹² IWM SR 6930 – Oral History: James Louis Molton (BEF Staff Officer).

¹⁹³ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk*, 233.

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This shows that the RAF still managed to be very active at Dunkirk, despite all the limitations that were stacked against them. However, there is evidence to suggest that the RAF's actions did not always happen around the evacuation site. Squadron Leader J.M. Thompson gives an account which suggests this was often the case;

‘We spent most of our time east and south-east of Dunkirk to try and intercept the Germans before they could reach Dunkirk. This may have accounted for the fact that the Army said they rarely saw any fighters.’¹⁹⁴

His account also gives another reason why the RAF was not always visible.

‘For some obscure reason we were never allowed to attack targets on the ground, although the opportunities were there in abundance: petrol tankers, lines of German transport and troops going towards Dunkirk. Perhaps the powers that were at the time were concerned about the civilian casualties which would almost certainly have resulted amongst the large number of refugees who were on the roads at the same time’¹⁹⁵

This implies that many RAF squadrons had only been instructed to fight against the German air forces and not those on the ground. As this would have prevented them from flying too low, and with visibility often being poor because of smoke and cloud cover, it is very likely that this is a reason why RAF craft was scarcely seen at Dunkirk. This is perhaps further suggested from this account by Pilot Officer A.C. Bartley of 92 Squadron;

‘No wonder the soldiers did not see us up at 10,000 feet, but little do they realise that we saved them from the ‘real bombs’, 500 pounds carried by the Heinkels. What reasons Fighter Command gave for forbidding us to go below 15,000 feet I don’t know.’¹⁹⁶

One such piece of evidence, and perhaps one of the most crucial pieces there is, is an aerial photograph¹⁹⁷ (fig. 1). Although the exact date this was taken is unclear, it was

¹⁹⁴ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 146.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 147.

¹⁹⁷ The RAF's vital role in the Dunkirk Evacuation - <https://www.rafbf.org/news-and-blogs/rafs-vital-role-dunkirk-evacuation>.

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taken during the time of the BEF evacuation as lines of troops are seen on the beaches below, waiting to be evacuated. Given that the picture is in the possession of the British Ministry of Defence and the Air Historical Branch of the RAF, it is very likely that it was taken from an RAF aircraft. Another aerial photograph of Dunkirk is in the possession of the National Collection of Aerial Photography (NCAP), also taken during the evacuation¹⁹⁸ (fig. 2). The picture shows Dunkirk ablaze, with fires and smoke billowing from wrecks of ships. As this photo is in the hands of the British NCAP, it is also very likely this was taken from an RAF craft.

As well as the aerial photography, there is further evidence which indicates there was a strong RAF presence at Dunkirk. Several RAF planes are known to have crash landed on or near the Dunkirk beaches after they were shot down by the German Luftwaffe. An example of this is a Spitfire aircraft piloted by Flying Officer Peter Cazenove that was shot down by a German Dornier Bomber, before crash-landing on the beach at Calais¹⁹⁹ (fig. 3). Cazanove was captured by the Nazis and taken to the Stalag Luft III prisoner of war camp, while the downed wreckage of the plane lay on the beach and would remain there for forty years, being consumed by the sand and tides until it was discovered and preserved in 1980. While the wreckage was not at the Dunkirk Beach itself, and therefore not visible at the scene of the evacuation, Calais is very near to Dunkirk and is also where some BEF troops were evacuated.

Another plane shot down over Dunkirk was a Supermarine Spitfire of the RAF 65 Squadron, which crash-landed on the beach of Dunkirk after it was downed by a Luftwaffe Messerschmitt-bf-109 on the eve of the evacuation, May 26 1940²⁰⁰ (fig. 4). Although the wreckage could be from the Battle of France beforehand, it could still have been shot down just before the evacuation officially started.

¹⁹⁸ National Collection of Aerial Photography: Dunkirk, 1940 - <https://ncap.org.uk/feature/dunkirk-1940>.

¹⁹⁹ Daily Mail: 75 years after it was shot down, restored Spitfire's £2.5 million mission for RAF veterans (27 April 2015) - <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3057575/Spitfire-shot-Dunkirk-discovered-buried-Calais-beach-40-years-later-auctioned-2-5million-fully-restored.html>.

²⁰⁰ Photograph of damaged Spitfire on Dunkirk Beach - <https://www.agefotostock.com/age/en/details-photo/65-squadron-royal-airforce-raf-supermarine-spitfire-1-on-the-beach-at-dunkirk-france-after-being-damaged-by-a-messerschmitt-bf-109-of-the-luftwaffe-and/MEV-11950721>.

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RAF 19 Squadron Leader Geoffrey Stephenson was also forced to crash-land his Spitfire on Sandgate Beach, near Calais, just before the evacuation on May 26 1940²⁰¹ (fig. 5). The wreckage of his downed craft also remained on the beach for many years and was gradually buried in the sands before being recovered in 1986 after strong currents revealed it. Again, it is also likely that the wreckage would have been visible on the beaches for quite some time after it was shot down.

RAF Fighter Pilot Alan Deere of 54 Squadron was also shot down at Dunkirk and forced to crash-land his aircraft on the beach; ‘I crash-landed on the beach between Dunkirk and Ostend, wheels up, right on the edge of the water – and the tide was coming in.’²⁰² Like Stephenson, it is likely that his aircraft would have been visible for quite some time before it also became gradually submerged; again this provides evidence that the RAF was at Dunkirk in some way.

Also of interest is a battle-damaged RAF pilot’s jacket that is one of many artefacts owned by the Imperial War Museum in London²⁰³ (fig. 6). The jacket belonged to Hurricane Pilot Group Captain Ronald N.H. Courtney, whose aircraft was shot down over Dunkirk on May 29 1940. The jacket itself has shrapnel holes; it is likely that Courtney was at the scene of the evacuation after abandoning his downed Hurricane and, like the BEF ground troops also present, was under fire numerous times from the German Forces.

It is likely there were good reasons why Navy and Army personnel formed the impression that the RAF was inactive at Dunkirk, but their scorn was nonetheless apparent. Gerald Ashcroft, who was a civilian Sea Scout aboard the Navy destroyer Sundowner at the time of the evacuation, mentions in his account of the evacuation how the RAF was nowhere to be seen;

‘The harbour mole leading down to the destroyer was jam-packed with soldiers so tightly they couldn’t move. There were no British aircraft at all,

²⁰¹ Imperial War Museum: The Spitfire Lost for almost 50 Years - <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-spitfire-lost-for-almost-50-years>.

²⁰² Spitfire Ace who crash-landed at Dunkirk (29 July 2017) - <https://www.pressreader.com/uk/daily-mail/20170729/282484298835555>.

²⁰³ Largs and Millport: Dunkirk Pilot’s Battle-damaged jacket acquired by Imperial War Museum - <https://www.largsandmillportnews.com/leisure/national-entertainment/18446513.dunkirk-pilots-battle-damaged-jacket-acquired-imperial-war-museum/>.

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and only the destroyer's anti-aircraft fire to depend on. The German air force was having a field day – and the fighters were coming straight along the mole, machine-gunning all the way. The troops just had to stand there. I felt very sorry indeed for them'²⁰⁴

While Ashcroft's accounts, and those of McLane and Fowler earlier on, differ from each other in some way, they all have one aspect in common. They all give the impression that the RAF provided little to no support for the soldiers being evacuated and the ships evacuating them.

A considerably more favourable attitude towards the RAF is evident amongst those servicemen who were able to make out their engagement with the Luftwaffe. John Purfield, a sailor on board a destroyer in the Royal Navy who played a part in the evacuation process at Dunkirk, acknowledges the dogfights between the RAF and Luftwaffe; 'one or two dogfights were going on in the air and chaps were coming down on parachutes... the beach was littered with German and British planes.'²⁰⁵ This suggests he believes that the RAF proved to be a great help at Dunkirk, in contrast to the accounts mentioned previously. Purfield still acknowledges the relentlessness of the German Luftwaffe, especially when the RAF was not around; 'on the second trip, we were attacked by six German bombers; after they had dropped their bombs, they machine-gunned us, injuring six of the crew,'²⁰⁶ but unlike the three accounts beforehand, he still acknowledges that the RAF was indeed providing support at Dunkirk.

John Osbourne, a civilian at the time of the Dunkirk evacuations who was one of many involved with the 'Little Ships of Dunkirk' armada, also acknowledges that the RAF was indeed present at Dunkirk;

'There were aircraft overhead, friend and foe, all the time; continual bombardment of the town, harbour and of the beaches by the Germans. Ships were being sunk and survivors rescued. All around the town and harbour of Dunkirk fires were blazing, a heavy pall of smoke hanging over

²⁰⁴ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk*, 217.

²⁰⁵ First hand account from Sussex sailor of Dunkirk Evacuation - <https://www.wscountytimes.co.uk/heritage-and-retro/retro/firsthand-account-sussex-sailor-dunkirk-evacuation-2870718>.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

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it all. From much further offshore the British ships were bombarding the German positions.²⁰⁷

Arthur Joscelyn, although potentially mistaking some RAF aircraft for that of the Luftwaffe as implied earlier, also recounts sighting RAF aircraft around Dunkirk;

‘Out of the mist we saw these five Stukas, they came over us and circled us. Then 500 yards was a Corvette Destroyer. Instead of going for us, they went for this Destroyer. As Stukas started to dive again, a whole squadron of Hurricanes came over and two or three detached themselves and chased them.’²⁰⁸

Neville Wood, a Royal Army Service Corps Driver of the 50th Northumbrian Division, also recalls seeing RAF craft at Dunkirk. While waiting on the beaches of Dunkirk with his division, he recalled an attack by the Luftwaffe against them before RAF craft came to their aid, engaging in a fierce battle with the Luftwaffe;

‘After what seemed like an eternity, the RAF appeared... Now Spitfires and Hurricanes swarmed through the air, harrying and destroying the German bombers. Those on the beach watched the dogfights crisscross the sky as the German fighters joined the melee’²⁰⁹

A report from the Commander of HMS Wivern from 31 May 1940 speaks about a visible dogfight near Dunkirk, in which RAF craft were present; ‘between F.G. Buoy and W. Buoys [markers outside Dunkirk], some bombing was observed about a mile ahead, apparently ineffective. RAF fighters soon appeared and no further enemy action was observed.’²¹⁰ Like the aerial photographs spoken about earlier, this indicates that the clouds and smoke that covered the beach were not always present and it was sometimes possible for aircraft activity to be seen. It also shows how the conditions at Dunkirk shaped different peoples’ perceptions of events. The visibility of air activity

²⁰⁷ Dunkirk. First Hand account of one of the small boats - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/70/a2657270.shtml>.

²⁰⁸ IWM SR 9768 – Oral History: Arthur Joscelyne (British Civilian Sailor).

²⁰⁹ Mike Wood, *A Soldier's Story* (London: Robinson, 2020), 55.

²¹⁰ TNA: ADM 199/786 - Operation Dynamo: Evacuation of troops from Dunkirk.

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from the ground, the time and precise locations they were present appear to have made all the difference in terms of RAF sightings at Dunkirk.

While the focus of newspapers at the time primarily focused on troops being successfully rescued and selling the evacuation as a ‘triumph’ or even a ‘victory’, many newspapers, local and national alike, still reported on the actions of the RAF. As they had with the events of Dunkirk, they reported on the RAF’s actions in a very positive light, determined to make it clear to the public that they were trouncing the German forces.

For instance, the *Nottingham Journal* on Thursday 30 May 1940 gave a short but positive mention of the RAF’s impact at Dunkirk. The article mentioned how they were involved in ‘a terrific air battle over the French coast near Dunkirk’ and ‘shot 22 of a large force of German bombers and fighters’, as well as how ‘the enemy’s advances had been considerably harassed and impeded by these attacks... one of our bombers had failed to return’.²¹¹

Similarly, the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* on Thursday 30 May 1940 also gave similar coverage to the *Nottingham Journal* on this day, mentioning how the RAF ‘brought down 22 Nazis without loss’.²¹² However, the *Nottingham Journal* mentions that there was one loss, while the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* mentions there were no losses, indicating that one of these articles may not be entirely accurate. Indeed, the determination of the Ministry of Information and the Press to portray Operation Dynamo in such a positive light would have led to some exaggerations.

During the early stages of the evacuation on Monday 27 May 1940, the *Bradford Observer* refers to the RAF’s role at Dunkirk in more detail than the *Aberdeen* or *Nottingham Journals*. It speaks about how the RAF ‘attacked Dunkirk docks while ‘the weather was very favourable’ and how ‘all the bombers were brought safely back’.²¹³ Another newspaper to speak about the RAF’s role at Dunkirk was the *Derry Journal* of Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on Friday 31 May 1940, with the article ‘Desperate

²¹¹ ‘RAF Shoot Down 22 Planes in Battle off Dunkirk’, *Nottingham Journal*, 30 May 1940.

²¹² ‘RAF Bring Down 22 Nazis Without Loss in Fight Over Dunkirk’, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 30 May 1940.

²¹³ ‘Calais-Dunkirk Air Battle: Spitefires Triumph’, *Bradford Observer*, 27 May 1940.

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Battle for Dunkirk: Land, Sea and Air Forces Engaged' reporting on the RAF's activity, describing their battle as 'desperate fighting in the air.'²¹⁴

RAF activity was also reported in *The Manchester Guardian* on May 31 1940, which gave reports on the evacuation. This includes the RAF's battles against the Luftwaffe, mentioning how they had destroyed 77 Nazi planes in the space of a day.²¹⁵

The *Daily Herald*, on 3 June 1940, reported how 'One hundred and nineteen Nazi aircraft have been destroyed or seriously damaged by the RAF over Dunkirk beaches since Saturday morning'²¹⁶, adding 'it is believed that the Germans have lost nearly 3,000 aircraft since the war began – 2,200 since May 10... on Thursday and Friday along we had accounted for more than 140 Germans.'²¹⁷ The *Daily Mirror*, on the first day of Operation Dynamo on 27 May 1940, reported how 'in four hours of fierce fighting the RAF yesterday shot down at least nearly twenty German planes and put another twenty out of action – thus keeping up its record at least forty a day'.²¹⁸ It also reports how 'a continuous air battle was fought over the French coast early yesterday between Calais and Dunkirk'²¹⁹ and 'pilots reported that the sky was filled with aircraft'.²²⁰ The *Daily News of London* on 30 May 1940 reported how there was a 'Great Battle over Dunkirk'²²¹ between the RAF and the Luftwaffe on this day, as 'a formation of Britain's Hurricanes and Defiants last evening engaged large forces of German bombers, heavily escorted by fighters, in the region of Dunkirk'.²²²

It is likely that some of the numbers presented in these newspapers regarding Luftwaffe casualties and aircraft numbers could have been exaggerated, especially with the inconsistencies. However, whether these articles are wholly accurate, several national and local newspapers still acknowledged that the RAF was not just present at Dunkirk but were active in defending the evacuation from the German forces.

²¹⁴ 'Desperate Battle for Dunkirk: Land, Sea and Air Forces Engaged', *Derry Journal (Londonderry)*, Friday 31 May 1940.

²¹⁵ 'The Miracle of the BEF's return – Majority of Force will be Saved: Stored of the Ordeal on Dunkirk Beach', *The Manchester Guardian*, May 31 1940.

²¹⁶ '119 Nazis Down In Two Days', *Daily Herald*, 3 June 1940.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ 'RAF Collect Yet Another 40 in a Day', *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1940.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ 'RAF in Great Battle over Dunkirk', *Daily News*, 30 May 1940.

²²² Ibid.

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Furthermore, Winston Churchill himself, as part of his iconic speech about how ‘wars are not won through evacuation’, even spoke highly about the RAF’s role;

‘...There was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the Air Force. Many of our soldiers coming back have not seen the Air Force at work; they saw only the bombers which escaped its protective attack. They underrate its achievements.’²²³

Clearly, Churchill not only believed they were active during Operation Dynamo, but were crucial to its ‘victory’. With Churchill being a figure the British people looked up to during time and having some responsibility for the creation of the Dunkirk myth, this alone should have dispelled any myths that the RAF had little to no presence. With this famous speech and numerous newspapers reporting on the RAF’s actions, there is concrete proof that the involvement of the RAF at Dunkirk was public knowledge, even if they were comparatively obscured by other aspects of Dunkirk.

Despite this, these were not enough to prevent the British Army at Dunkirk from becoming resentful towards the British Army, in some cases being outright abusive. An extract from the logbook of Tony Bartley of RAF 92 Squadron speaks about a fellow RAF airman who interacted with, and was accosted by, ground soldiers on the Dunkirk beaches;

‘We heard from Pete Cazanove, fellow airman who was shot down and captured at Dunkirk, he tried to get on three destroyers but was turned off each one. The Navy said all accommodation was reserved for the Army and the Air Force could go f--- themselves.’²²⁴

He also gives another example of how there were interactions between RAF airmen and ground soldiers on the beaches, albeit ones of an abusive nature;

‘Another friend of mine [Alan Deere] was in the same predicament, but he knocked out the Navy man who tried to stop him, and got himself aboard.’²²⁵

²²³ Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 86.

²²⁴ Secret History: Dunkirk, The New Evidence - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AygSW1IWVOK>.

²²⁵ Ibid.

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Again, these points provide not only further evidence of RAF airmen engaging with ground soldiers but also demonstrate the animosity that the regular troops felt towards the RAF at the time.

Pilot Officer Tony Bartlett, of RAF 92 Squadron, gives another example of how RAF troops were accosted at Dunkirk;

‘A fighter pilot I knew was shot down at Dunkirk and went in the sea. He swam out to a boat and he got on board and the navy chap said, ‘Get back! We’re not picking you up, you bastards! We’re only picking up the soldiers!’²²⁶

Squadron Leader J.M. Thompson gives a similar account to these of criticism he and a fellow RAF pilot faced from soldiers who had believed the RAF was not present:

‘I remember one evening going to Victoria station to pick up a pilot who had come back after being shot down and rescued. There was a large number of British soldiers on the platform at the same time who had also just come back from Dunkirk. We got a really good verbal pasting from them about how the RAF was never seen, where were we and what the hell were we doing, etc. Little did they know or appreciate what was happening or what we were trying to do on their behalf’²²⁷

This resentment even continued for a while after the evacuation had finished; BEF private E. Newbould of Leeds, West Yorkshire, gives an account of an alleged incident that occurred between some BEF soldiers and RAF personnel after the evacuations;

‘There was bitterness towards the RAF. We did not know how short we were of planes and thought their absence was because they were frightened to come out and fight. I am sure I read somewhere shortly after coming home that some of those who had been evacuated and were waiting near an aerodrome in the south to rejoin their units went into the RAF quarters one evening and had a free for all with the RAF personnel because they thought

²²⁶ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk*, 236.

²²⁷ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 146.

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they had been let down. Perhaps they were drunk, but it was all rather sad'²²⁸

Pilot Officer Hugh Dundas of RAF 616 Squadron also gives an account of the resentment he and his squadron faced for their perceived absence at Dunkirk;

‘When we came back to Britain, Army people used to say: ‘where the hell were you lot? Nobody tried to knock my block off, but there was hostility and criticism, and we took it hard because we had our losses and we certainly were there’²²⁹

Evidently, there were sightings of RAF aircraft and indisputable evidence that the RAF was active at Dunkirk, namely signs of RAF aircraft providing defences and the wreckage of numerous RAF aircraft on the beaches. This should have put to rest any claims that the RAF had left the Army to fend for themselves at Dunkirk or had been little to no help during the evacuations. However, they were clearly not enough to prevent the RAF’s reputation from being tainted to an extent. This demonstrates the power myth can have to form narratives of events, narratives that can be taken at face value. It also shows the power that memory can have if shared by a large number of people and how it shapes perspectives and forms narratives more easily than physical evidence or the actual occurrence of events can. Hundreds of thousands of troops had made it to the beaches and there were also hundreds of Royal Navy personnel who were assisting in the evacuation, as well as dozens, at the very least, of civilians who manned the Little Ships of Dunkirk. And it is evident that RAF sightings at and around Dunkirk were limited, especially compared to the Luftwaffe, who carried out vicious assaults, taking full advantage of instances when the RAF was not present.

Inevitably, this meant that aircraft sightings over the beaches were mostly that of the Luftwaffe; for many, this became the only aircraft activity they saw. Inevitably, this perception that the RAF did little or nothing to help and the RAF was left unopposed to attack them would have been shared by many of the thousands present on the beaches over the nine days. Furthermore, both the Royal Navy and the Little Ships of Dunkirk were not just present, but they were directly involved in the rescue of the troops. Given

²²⁸ Frank Shaw, *We Remember Dunkirk* (New York: Random House, 2013), 89.

²²⁹ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of France*, 236.

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how many of the RAF's actions took place away from the coast of Dunkirk, their defensive actions would rarely be seen, if at all. The Navy and the Little Ships were widely praised, while the RAF, although receiving credit for their actions from many, gained a bad reputation, as the testimonies presented in this chapter have indicated. Although this is a bad reputation that appears to have existed primarily amongst the British Army and the Royal Navy, the unfortunate circumstances that prevented many RAF sightings still created disdain amongst a very large number of people. Such criticisms were mainly rife shortly after the evacuations, but some disdain remained for years after the War.

Myth and Memory

However widespread this reputation may or may not have been, it evidently formed a narrative; the BEF troops had been forced back from Belgium all the way back to the beaches of Dunkirk. There, they were cornered and constantly bombarded by Luftwaffe planes but were rescued by the Royal Navy and a fleet of vessels manned by brave civilians. Although the role of the RAF has been acknowledged right from the start, as Winston Churchill acknowledged their role in a public radio broadcast and some newspaper articles reported on their role, the RAF was, for several decades at least, mostly left out of this narrative. It seems that they only became an important component of the same narrative many years after the war. An example of this is present in the Dunkirk films from 1958 and 2017, which are touched upon in the first chapter. In the 1958 film, the RAF does not feature, while in the 2017 film, they form an integral part of the plot. Their absence in the former is unlikely to be the result of any ill feelings, given the film primarily intended to focus on the plight of the soldiers on the beaches,²³⁰ but it does indicate how the RAF was not as prominent in the popular memory of Dunkirk compared to recent years.

Although not widespread and has eroded over the years, the perceived inefficiency of the RAF at Dunkirk tainted their reputation. This is something that popular memory has the power to do. Witnessing things first-hand is much more potent than reading or hearing about that certain event. For the Dunkirk evacuations, many of the hundreds of

²³⁰ Penny Summerfield, "Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45/4, (2010), 788.

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thousands of people on the beaches only saw the Luftwaffe attacking them. Even if they saw RAF aircraft flying overhead, chances are they never saw for themselves the efforts the RAF was making to allow them to be evacuated from the beaches. This shows how memory can be just as strong, or even stronger, than physical and testimonial evidence, being enough to taint reputations. This is what happened with the RAF at Dunkirk and during the Second World War.

This is also something that myth has the power to do. The Little Ships of Dunkirk and the resilience of the troops were quick to be at the forefront of public memory because of the 'narrative' that was created by the myth of Dunkirk. Both were heavily reported in the press, which made them the core elements of the 'narrative' created about Dunkirk, comparatively obscuring the role of the RAF in the process. The numerous complaints and accusations made against the RAF for what was perceived to be little to no RAF support could also have been a factor. This demonstrates how myths about events can be created; certain aspects of an event being focused on or remembered more than other aspects. This is what happened with Dunkirk. Furthermore, the Little Ships of Dunkirk were in the eye of the storm, arguably more so than the RAF. They were present on the beaches with the trapped BEF troops, actively rescuing them, ferrying them to the waiting Navy vessels or returning them home to Britain in some cases. They would also be at the mercy of the Luftwaffe, just like the BEF and the Royal Navy. This would have given an impression of all three components 'pulling together' in a dangerous situation, struggling and working together against a dangerous enemy, though it is the BEF and the Little Ships of Dunkirk that were at the forefront of this image. An image that would become overemphasised by myth.

As described by Mark Connelly, 'Dunkirk and the Dunkirk spirit have gone into our language and mental landscape. They are constant favourites of politicians and have become a form of ubiquitous shorthand.'²³¹ Despite the catastrophic defeat that Dunkirk was, myth has turned it into a 'triumph'. The reason for Dynamo being necessary, Germany's rapid invasion of north-west Europe which caught the Allies off-guard, and the disastrous consequences that followed, from the loss of valuable army equipment to the loss of France as a vital ally and much of mainland Europe now under

²³¹ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 88.

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German control, are not at the forefront of popular memory. It is the bravery of the BEF and the valiant Little Ships of Dunkirk and how they ‘pulled together’ in a difficult situation which has become the core element of Dunkirk in myth and popular memory. As a result, the RAF and, to an extent, the Navy were comparatively forgotten, despite their importance; the Navy bringing home the majority of BEF troops and the RAF defending the evacuation. But it was the resilience of the BEF and the bravery of the civilians manning vessels that were the components which stood out the most, and subsequently became central to the myth of Dunkirk.

The RAF would indeed be at the forefront of the ‘narrative’ for the Battle of Britain, which would also be created by myth. The Battle of Britain was the attempted invasion of Britain by Germany, from July to October 1940, following their successful invasion of north-west Europe. As shall be explained later in the thesis, the Luftwaffe was a significant threat to Britain during this time as it was responsible for numerous attacks across the country. It was the RAF that was once again tasked with fighting off the Luftwaffe, this time receiving widespread recognition for their actions, even if it would become overemphasised by mythology. Recognition that, to the author’s mind, was just as deserving for their actions at Operation Dynamo, given the similarity of their role.

As this chapter has demonstrated, newspapers at the time reported on the RAF at Dunkirk and how they were actively defending the evacuation, even though there was some exaggeration in order to sell Dunkirk as a ‘triumphant victory’, and Churchill was publicly vocal about the RAF and full of praise for their actions. These should have been enough to give the RAF an equal place within this ‘narrative’, but it was not. Though the RAF was featured in news reports of the evacuation, the priority still appeared to be on the bravery of the BEF and civilians alike. The lack of RAF sightings over Dunkirk and the disdain towards the RAF held by the BEF for seemingly abandoning them would also have contributed to the RAF falling into obscurity.

Conclusion

It is clear the RAF gained a bad reputation among the British Army for their perceived absence from Dunkirk. What is also clear is that the RAF faced numerous challenges,

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which hampered their actions in some way. They were at a disadvantage against the Luftwaffe because of limited resources and poor weather conditions. They were also the victims of unfortunate timing, as a lot of their defensive actions took place away from the coast. This resulted in a limited amount of RAF sightings, fuelling the bad reputation they gained. Even when they fought over the Dunkirk coast, their presence was hidden by cloud cover and smoke from burning wrecks much of the time. All these led to a shared notion that the RAF left the BEF at the mercy Nazi Germany at Dunkirk. The RAF not receiving as much focus in the 'narrative' created by myth would have most likely enhanced this notion for many. At the same time, there is evidence that counters this notion. Many testimonies from RAF pilots who fought at Dunkirk exist, as well as accounts from soldiers, civilians and Navy personnel which mention sightings of RAF aircraft or seeing indications that they were active. Several newspapers at the time also spoke about the RAF's involvement in some way. But arguably the most significant evidence to exist is the photographic evidence that gives a clear indication that the RAF was indeed active at Dunkirk. However, myth and memory were much stronger than this evidence as they shaped a 'narrative' for many that the RAF provided little to no support or that the Little Ships of Dunkirk were the most important part of the Dunkirk evacuation. Despite this, as strong as myth and memory are in forming and damaging reputations, it is physical evidence that is indisputable.

Although it missed out on significant praise and recognition due to myth and popular memory, when compared with the other evacuation components, the RAF was not only present but evidently played an important role at Operation Dynamo. However, one question now remains; how crucial were the RAF to the Dunkirk evacuation?

How crucial was the RAF to the Dunkirk Evacuation of May 1940?

Appendix – Chapter Two

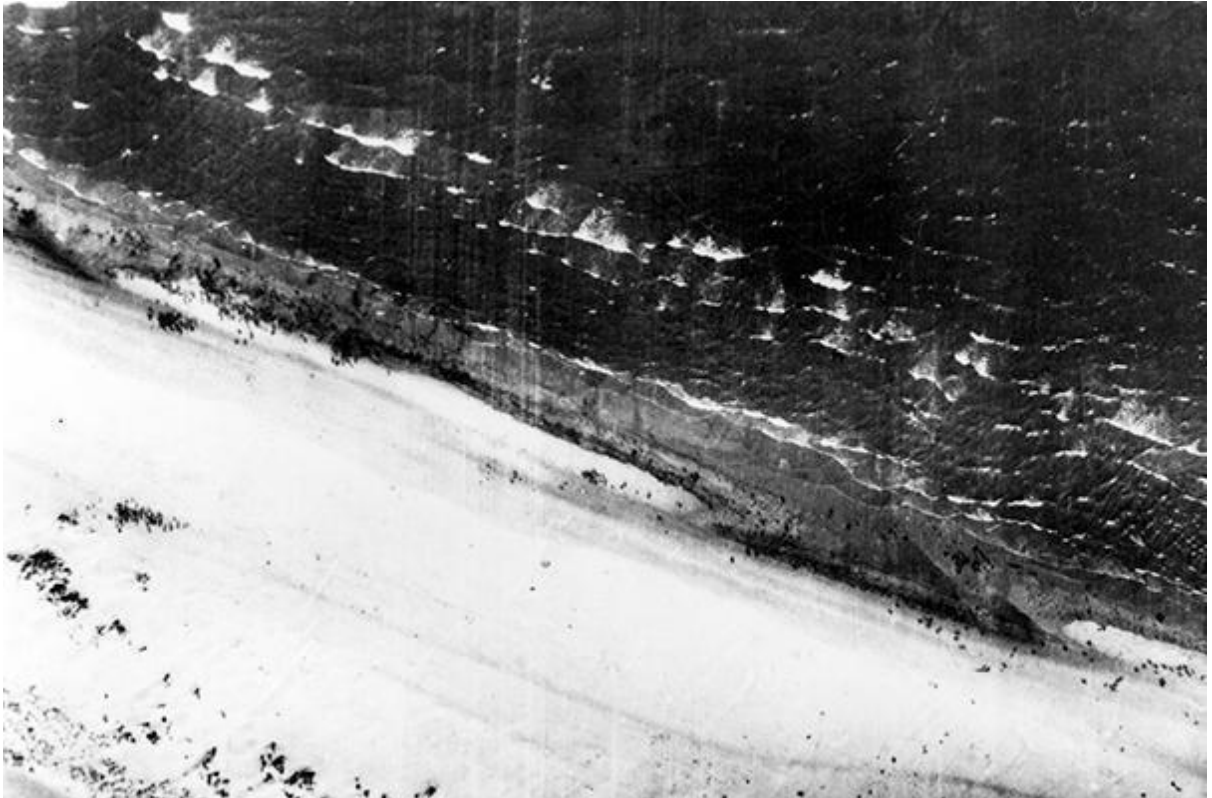


Fig. 1 – Aerial view of the beach at Dunkirk showing BEF troops awaiting evacuation (photograph in possession of Ministry of Defence/RAF Air Historical Branch)
<https://www.rafbf.org/news-and-blogs/rafs-vital-role-dunkirk-evacuation>



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Fig. 2 – Aerial photograph showing Dunkirk ablaze, with smoke billowing from burning wrecks (National Collection of Aerial Photography, <https://ncap.org.uk/feature/dunkirk-1940>)



Fig. 3 - photograph of downed Spitfire at Calais
(<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3057575/Spitfire-shot-Dunkirk-discovered-buried-Calais-beach-40-years-later-auctioned-2-5million-fully-restored.html>)



Fig. 4 – downed 65 Squadron RAF Supermarine Spitfire 1 on the Beach at Dunkirk, 26 May 1940 (<https://www.agefotostock.com/age/en/details-photo/65-squadron-royal->

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[airforce-raf-supermarine-spitfire-1-on-the-beach-at-dunkirk-france-after-being-damaged-by-a-messerschmitt-bf-109-of-the-luftwaffe-and/MEV-11950721](https://www.airforce-raf.co.uk/airforce-raf-supermarine-spitfire-1-on-the-beach-at-dunkirk-france-after-being-damaged-by-a-messerschmitt-bf-109-of-the-luftwaffe-and/MEV-11950721)



Fig. 5 – Squadron Leader Stephenson’s downed Spitfire on the Beach of Sandgate, near Calais (<https://www.historyhit.com/19-squadron-the-spitfire-pilots-who-defended-the-dunkirk-evacuation/>)



Fig. 6 – the battle-damaged jacket of Hurricane pilot Group Captain Ronald N.H. Courtney now in the care of the Imperial War Museum, London (<https://www.forces.net/news/dunkirk-pilots-battle-damaged-jacket-goes-imperial-war-museum>)

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Chapter 3: The RAF at Dunkirk

Introduction

The previous chapters established that the RAF was indeed active during Operation Dynamo, despite criticism that appeared to suggest otherwise and myth making their role comparatively obscure. With this fact now established, several questions remain for this project; how effective were the RAF at making sure the evacuation went smoothly? How were their actions affected by the opposing German armed forces? Would their apparent lack of presence be entirely responsible for the problems the evacuation faced? But the most important question is this: how crucial was the role that the RAF played at Dunkirk?

It is this chapter that will answer these questions, as well as looking at the RAF's actions before and after Operation Dynamo, the significance of their role in comparison to the Navy and Little Ships of Dunkirk and how the Luftwaffe, their main opponent, appeared to be much stronger. Furthermore, evidence in previous chapters, along with evidence that will be presented in this chapter, has suggested that the RAF was the less visible component of Operation Dynamo. While it appears this was the case, whether this was something that made a difference to the part played by the RAF will also be examined. What will also be explained is how the myth of Dunkirk was formed from the framework of pre-existing mythology and how this in turn made the role of the RAF fall into obscurity to a certain extent.

The RAF and the Myth of Dunkirk

Of all the components involved in the rescue of troops from the Dunkirk beaches, it is the Little Ships of Dunkirk that have remained the most prominent in the public memory and become one of the most prominent features in the myth of Dunkirk. 'Even more famous than the image of the troops brought off the beaches of Dunkirk are the ships that carried them'²³² says historian Mark Connelly, 'little has changed since 1940, the Armada of ordinary launches and yachts were famous then and made a deep impression on the public imagination.'²³³ The gallantry of ordinary civilians manning

²³² Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 72.

²³³ *Ibid*, 72.

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ordinary non-military vessels and entering a warzone to rescue the stranded troops was heavily reported, gaining the attention of the public, making the Little Ships of Dunkirk rise to fame. Contrary to this myth, most of the troops rescued at Dunkirk were returned to England by the ships of the Royal Navy, but this fact has been overshadowed by the uniqueness of this unlikely armada, as, as Connelly puts it, ‘at the time most people were impressed by the idea of ordinary people doing their bit for their boys.’²³⁴ Connelly makes a very intriguing point about the Little Ships, and the Dunkirk evacuation as a whole; the framework for the mythologisation of these components was already in place. ‘It was easy to mythologise the little ships’²³⁵ Connelly mentions, ‘for as with every aspect of 1940 it appealed to a world of inherited culture and iconography. Everyone knew the hulking galleons of the Spanish Armada had been fought off by much smaller ships.’²³⁶ Myths and legends of triumphs at sea, as this example indicates, had persisted for years which, given the situation the Little Ships of Dunkirk were in (rescuing stranded troops from a seemingly unbeatable enemy), which made it inevitable that they would also become one of these. This is not the only reason as Connelly also notes ‘the little ships of Dunkirk not only connected with the established seafaring myths of the British, they also echoed those qualities so beloved by the British – improvisation, amateurism and individualism.’²³⁷ As well as pre-existing mythology, uniqueness is also what gave the Little Ships their firm place in Dunkirk mythology; a hastily-assembled flotilla of various small non-military vessels manned by brave civilians entering a warzone was unheard of and nothing like it has been seen since.

Pre-existing mythology also served as another reason why the Dunkirk evacuation as a whole rose to fame. For many years, there had been legends and stories of people facing off against unbeatable odds which resonated with the British people, as Mark Connelly puts it ‘standing alone, fighting weird, wonderful and incomprehensible foreigners of all sorts against great odds is something that strikes a chord in the

²³⁴ Ibid, 72.

²³⁵ Ibid, 73.

²³⁶ Ibid, 73.

²³⁷ Ibid, 74.

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British.²³⁸ Connelly gives an example of this, one that would have still been fairly recent at the time of Dunkirk

‘In late August 1914 the British Expeditionary Force found itself facing a vastly superior German army just outside the Belgian town of Mons This tiny force was then allegedly referred to as a ‘contemptible little army’ by the Kaiser. The fact that this was a mistranslation doesn’t actually matter for this argument, what was reported and what people thought does. For the soldiers of the BEF it become an accolade, and they have gone down in history as the ‘old contemptibles’. It hardly needs stating that the battles of the BEF were turned into modern legends almost as soon as they were fought: at Mons the British riflemen, assisted either by the ghosts of their ancestors who had fought at Agincourt or an angel, gave the overconfident Germans a bloody nose and retreated in good order.’²³⁹

By this time, such legends and stories had become imprinted in collective and popular memory. Since Britain became a great military, economic and political power, Britain’s interpretation of itself appeared to take the form of having achieved status through facing unbeatable odds, as Connelly notes; ‘the basic thrust of the iconography of nationality was that Britain had evolved by seeing off all sorts of threatening foreigners and had heroically withstood moments of intense peril... combined with this was a celebration of the fact it had been achieved by a very small island indeed.’²⁴⁰ The late nineteenth century would see such interpretations become more public with ‘the stories of the popular heroes of empire, lionised in music halls, in books, cheap prints and on tea caddies nearly all conformed to this pattern... the repetition of these images created a model of behaviour and expectation in the British people which survived long into the twentieth century.’²⁴¹

The events of Operation Dynamo would have fit this imagery very well. In the days leading up to the commencement of the evacuation, the BEF had faced odds that seemed unbeatable, having been pushed back by the German armed forces from

²³⁸ Ibid, 56.

²³⁹ Ibid, 58.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 57.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 57.

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Belgium all the way back to northern France, where they were cornered at Dunkirk and at the mercy of the Luftwaffe. However, despite these grave circumstances, most of the BEF were rescued from the beaches by the Navy with the help of the Little Ships of Dunkirk. Although not a victory against a powerful enemy as the myth makes it seem, the evacuation was still part of the BEF's retreat with the conflict far from over and the Luftwaffe still very much active, it is easy to see why the Dunkirk evacuation became another of these stories and a part of mythology.

This could also serve as another explanation why the RAF, and the Royal Navy to a certain extent, do not appear to be prominent features of Dunkirk mythology. Both components were indeed heavily involved, however this is what they were expected to do. There was no uniqueness factor to either of them, therefore the heroics of the stranded troops at Dunkirk and the Little Ships of Dunkirk took centre stage in Dunkirk mythology. The bravery of troops waiting on the beaches, despite the catastrophic defeat the BEF suffered, and the valiant armada of civilian vessels, a fleet of numerous small boats gathered at the eleventh hour all manned by determined civilians, both caught the attention of the public a lot more. Such feelings would have been amplified by the heavy press coverage which, as explained earlier, were determined to report Operation Dynamo in a very positive light at the insistence of the Ministry of Information.

The focus on the struggles of the people, civilian and soldier alike, obscured the role of the RAF within the myth of Dunkirk. There was still praise for the RAF in the press, albeit on a comparatively limited scale, however the acclaim of the Little Ships of Dunkirk was much higher and was reported a lot more. As such they became the most iconic feature of Dunkirk and for many people are perhaps the first thing that springs to mind whenever Dunkirk is mentioned. What also could have helped them obtain their place within myth and popular memory is how they were in the thick of it along with the troops being rescued, they were directly in the warzone, actively helping to rescue the troops and either ferry them to waiting Navy vessels or deliver them home to Britain. The RAF, however, were not always present over the beaches, being engaged in inland attacks against the German armed forces or in dogfights against the Luftwaffe over the English Channel. The limitations outlined in Chapter Two also would have contributed to occasional absences. Even when they were over the beaches

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and defending the evacuation, they could not always be seen. This led to many ill feelings against the RAF by many of the stranded troops, leading to a vilification of the RAF by much of the Army, with RAF airmen receiving abuse for their perceived 'no show'. These factors most likely contributed to the RAF's obscurity within the myth of Dunkirk. Although they have little to no role in the myth of Dunkirk, this does not mean that they did not play a critical role before, during and after Operation Dynamo.

The RAF in The Battle of France

The Royal Air Force's activity in France began long before the Battle of France, back in September 1939. Numerous RAF squadrons had been based in France since the outbreak of war in September 1939, which would be known as the Advance Aircraft Strike Force (AASF). However, these would first see combat action on May 10 1940, with the commencement of the German Blitzkrieg.

During the Battle of France, the AASF and the RAF squadrons based in Britain were active, with a variety of aircraft being used, from Fairey Battles from the Fleet Air Arm to the more common aircraft of RAF Fighter Command: Spitfires, Defiants and Hurricanes. RAF fighters and bombers provided air support for the BEF in Belgium and France, with the Dutch and Belgian Air Forces providing support. A total of 1,900 aircraft were available for the Allies, the RAF had 900 fighters and 650 bombers with 300 aircraft from the Belgian and Dutch Air Forces. This was still outnumbered by the Luftwaffe's fleet of 4,500 aircraft; however, the French Armee de L'Air was growing in strength, as modern planes were introduced and production was increasing.²⁴² All this sounds like a force that could have evenly matched the Luftwaffe, but this would not be the case. Like how the BEF fared poorly against the sudden launch of the Blitzkrieg, the RAF faced much difficulty at the Battle of France.

The War Cabinet and the RAF was anxious about sending too many fighter craft over to Europe, being concerned about the need for aircraft later in the war, concerns that proved justifiable with the Battle of Britain later in 1940.²⁴³ Though this decision may have proved helpful for later in the war, this would not have helped the Allies' fortunes in the Battle of France, fewer aircraft squadrons were sent and the 400 RAF planes that

²⁴² Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle for France and The Battle of Britain* (Oxford: Fonthill Media Limited, 2016), 154.

²⁴³ Events of the Battle of Britain are spoken about in Chapter Four.

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took part proved to be no match for the superior 1,400 Luftwaffe aircraft that partook. On May 10, 500 Luftwaffe planes took part, which saw the Allied Forces being outmatched, including the RAF, with a total of fifteen aircraft being shot down.²⁴⁴ This attack was so rapid and ferocious that the comparatively smaller air forces of Holland and Belgium were wiped out on the ground within the first day of the Blitzkrieg.²⁴⁵

From 10 May to 15 May 1940, aircraft of the AASF were deployed to attack enemy columns approaching Luxembourg with 12 of the 32 aircraft deployed for this mission lost to Anti-Aircraft Guns. The Dutch aerodromes of Waalhaven and Ypenburg, now under German control, were attacked by No.2 Group from Bomber Command, whilst Waalhaven was attacked by heavy bomber aircraft. Attacks on the enemy columns in Luxembourg continued by the AASF Battle aircraft, but bridgeheads at Maastricht caused a switch in focus to bomb enemy columns on the roads towards Maastricht and against canal bridges west of that area, an attack that had partial success. Focus was also given to destroying pontoon bridges which the German armed forces had made across the River Meuse to speed up their invasion. One of these bridges was destroyed in the first of these attacks, with two more being destroyed in a subsequent attack. Much damage was inflicted on enemy mechanised columns on the road between Bouillon and Givonnes. These attacks had little success as the columns had heavy defences, both by heavy flak and strong German fighter cover,²⁴⁶ with 35 out of 67 aircraft being lost.²⁴⁷

The amount of enemy aircraft in use for attacks on Allied aerodromes in France, Belgium and Holland, and supporting the advancing forces for the Blitzkrieg, called for a fighter effort that was greater than had been anticipated. They were forced to operate under high pressure to defend the aerodromes and provide cover for the bomber operations mentioned previously. This resulted in deficiencies in aircraft, caused by damage in combat, which made these operations difficult, with the pilots themselves becoming worn out. This necessitated the appeal to the Air Ministry for the replacement of pilots and for more aircraft to be provided. However, there was still a

²⁴⁴ Greg Baughen, *RAF in the Battle for France*, 153-155.

²⁴⁵ Terence John Kean, *The Battle for France* (Lisek Publications), 10.

²⁴⁶ Philip Warner, *The Battle for France: Six Weeks that Changed the World* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 1990), 125-6.

²⁴⁷ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Strafford's papers, RAF Activity Report.

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success on the part of the RAF, as it was reported that 40 enemy aircraft were shot down, with four reportedly lost and eight considered unlikely to have returned to their bases. Four Hurricanes were also reported to have been shot down during this period.²⁴⁸

Reconnaissance patrols were also carried out from 10 May 1940 for the approaches into Holland, north of the Rhine, carried out by aircraft of Bomber Command. A few days after they had begun, however, these patrols were discontinued, most likely down to coming under heavy enemy attacks. Despite their short time in use, these reconnaissance missions proved to be valuable for these first few days of the battle.²⁴⁹

On May 11 1940, the Belgian government appealed to the Allied forces to destroy the Albert Canal Bridges, as these would allow the German ground forces to advance with ease around Maastricht. However, the German forces had already installed many anti-aircraft guns that had already been used against the Belgian air force when it had attacked earlier, with six of the nine aircraft being shot down, while the three remaining planes failed to do any damage. Further attacks from the RAF also failed to hit any targets. Ten aircraft from the French Armee de L'Air, in their first bombing run of the battle of France, also attacked but their only success, again because of effective anti-aircraft weapons, was setting fire to some of the German vehicles and they were unable to destroy or damage any of the bridges.²⁵⁰

May 14 1940 saw the German forces break through the French front at Sedan, with the remaining RAF craft ordered to attack the pontoon bridges and the troops in the area. 109 aircraft were sent by the RAF to put a stop to the German Armed Forces, but they would be outnumbered, losing 45 planes in the process.²⁵¹ This attack would prove to be the highest loss in an operation that the RAF has ever sustained. Later in the afternoon, 57 Heinkels from KG54, one of the German Luftwaffe squadrons, launched a devastating attack on Rotterdam city centre, resulting in 814 civilian casualties and the surrender of all Dutch forces.²⁵² By this stage, it was clear that things were going

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Greg Baughen, *RAF in the Battle for France*, 169-171.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 100.

²⁵² Ibid, 98.

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very badly for the RAF and the BEF forces, which resulted in concerns by the British Government of Britain's fighter strength being diminished. A plea by the French Air Minister for more RAF craft to be sent over had to be refused as it was considered too risky. However, they eventually sent over six squadrons when a further plea from the French came in that stated they had lost all their best artillery.²⁵³

Something that was likely to have affected the RAF's activity was how many RAF Squadrons were based in aerodromes in France. These aerodromes were quick to come under attack from the Luftwaffe, forcing the RAF craft there to relocate to bases in Britain. This likely made operations difficult for these squadrons as it meant further to travel and, as shall be explained further in this chapter, RAF aircraft had limited fuel capacity at the time. One such squadron was RAF 88 Squadron, their aerodrome, in Mourmelon, was among the first to be attacked in the Blitzkrieg. According to an Operations Record Book for 88 Squadron, at 04:30hrs, their Aerodrome was heavily bombed by enemy aircraft. Although the aerodrome remained serviceable, it would still suffer much damage. It was attacked again at 17:00hrs, while no personnel were reported to be injured, the hangers were hit badly with telephone communications being broken. On 14 May, it would be bombed several times during the day, to the point where orders were received to stand by for an immediate evacuation. Further attacks on 16 May saw all aircraft being relocated to another aerodrome at Les Grandes Chappelles.²⁵⁴

During the period of 16 May to 22 May 1940, the AASF, because of heavy losses sustained from day attacks during the first period of the operation, limited medium bomber activities to night bombing. However, some Battle aircraft were still deployed by day to attack targets such as troop and transport columns. Night attacks began on 20 May 1940, the targets selected were key points in German communication systems at Dinant, Givet, Fermoy and Montherme.²⁵⁵ Several of these operations were also hampered by misty conditions around the River Meuse, with few pilots claiming hits on anything. Both sides of the conflict appeared to have been hampered by these

²⁵³ Phillip Warner, *The Battle for France*, 125-6.

²⁵⁴ TNA: AIR 27/716/15 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 88.

²⁵⁵ Phillip Warner, *The Battle for France*, 123.

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conditions as only one Battle was lost due to enemy action.²⁵⁶ However, several of these attacks were reported to be successful, with limited casualties to their Battle aircraft, though this was mainly due to the reduction in day activity.²⁵⁷ On 21 May 1940, with indirect support provided by 26 Hurricanes, AASF bombers resumed their daylight operations and 33 Battles in small flight formations would attack German columns near Reims.²⁵⁸ On the night of 21 May, 41 Battles prepared to carry out a raid in Ardennes. However, this operation was cancelled by the Air Ministry in favour of operations against German tanks, during the day around Arras, Amiens and Abbeville. The reason for this decision was that tanks were small targets and thus easier to attack, with the Battles being less viable targets in the process, therefore conserving the fleet.²⁵⁹

Within this timeframe, the aircraft of Bomber Command No. 2 Group suffered severe casualties during daylight operations. For instance, one formation sent to attack the road and rail junction at Gembloux to block the advance of a large troop column lost 11 of its 12 aircraft. Because of this, it was decided No. 2 Group aircraft would be called upon to operate at night. However, this decision was not implemented, as there were further targets discovered by reconnaissance flights or by French armed forces that were regarded as a high priority for attack, including troop concentrations and columns on the move. It was thought that if these targets were not attacked right away, they could disappear by the time the attack was delivered. As a result, attacks on troop concentrations and armoured columns during daylight continued being carried out, although cloud cover and fighter protection, which was asked for and provided from Britain, were heavily relied upon. During this period, two squadrons of Blenheim aircraft from 2 Group were sent to France where they would be operated by the Air Component of the BEF. This arrangement failed to work, however, as the Air Component, which was not informed of the situation, deployed them on minor targets, which prevented their use when major targets were presented. As a result, this system was dropped with these aircraft being returned to Bomber Command's control. The objective for night operations was destroying or disrupting the enemy's main

²⁵⁶ Greg Baughen, *The Fairey Battle: A Reassessment of its RAF career* (Fonthill Media, 2017), 123.

²⁵⁷ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Strafford's Papers, RAF Activity Report.

²⁵⁸ Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle for France and Dunkirk*, 110.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 123.

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communication systems, with attacks focusing on key areas including Maastricht, Aachen and Munchen Cladbach. Occasionally, due to urgent demands, they had gone further to key areas that had an immediate bearing on the ground battle, including the Cambrai – Le Cateau Guise – St Quentin Area. Attacks would also be carried out against enemy columns on roads and were reportedly successful.

Fighter operations during this period involved providing cover for bombing attacks carried out by Bomber Command and the AASF, defending Allied aerodromes, offensive patrols to counter dive-bombing operations and cover for reconnaissance aircraft.²⁶⁰ Fighter operations had mixed results, some would be successful, but would also be hampered by Luftwaffe attacks. This was particularly evident on 20 May which saw twelve Hurricanes shot down by Luftwaffe and anti-aircraft fire, seven of which were downed by the latter, with three pilots killed and one being captured. However, eighteen Luftwaffe craft would be either shot down or damaged.²⁶¹

From 23 May through to 4 June 1940, the AASF would be deployed mainly at night, with the main exception being troop concentrations in the Somme Area. Main night targets were communication centres at Givet, Dinant, Pin and Conz, in addition to fuel and ammunition dumps at Florenville and Libramont, the aim of these attacks being to disrupt supplies of reinforcements, ammunition and petrol. A particular notable attack of this kind was on 24 May, which saw several of these railway sidings, supply dumps and roads attacked by 41 Battle aircraft. Twenty pounds of incendiary bombs, forty pounds of anti-personnel explosives and 250-pound bombs were all used.²⁶²

Aerodromes from which the RAF was operating were also attacked,²⁶³ as were crossings over the River Meuse to stop the further advance.²⁶⁴ Night operations were disrupted by bad weather and dark nights, especially problematic as the Battles had not been built for night operations, as a limited view from their observation compartment would make it hard for the occupant being unable to find targets. Despite this setback, these operations were successful with little aircraft casualties.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁰ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Strafford's Papers, RAF Activity Report.

²⁶¹ Greg Baughen, *The RAF in the Battle for France and Dunkirk*, 191.

²⁶² Greg Baughen, *The Fairey Battle: A Reassessment of its RAF career* (Oxford: Fonthill Media Ltd, 2017), 126.

²⁶³ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Strafford's Papers, RAF Activity Report.

²⁶⁴ Greg Baughen, *The Fairey Battle: A Reassessment of its RAF career*, 126.

²⁶⁵ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Strafford's Papers, RAF Activity Report.

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Bomber Command's operations during this period involved supporting Allied forces in the ground battle in Northern France by attacking armoured columns, concentrations and transports, attacks which were reportedly successful. Night operations primarily focused on railway and road communications in Northern France, along which supplies for the German forces were to be transported, and supply dumps and aerodromes within the same region. Bomber Command delivered heavy attacks on these targets, with the attack of supply trains and petrol and ammunition dumps having success, especially with a large dump at Libramont suffering severe damage.²⁶⁶

Fighter operations during this period, consisted of carrying out offensive patrols in the Abbeville – St. Pol – Arras – Cambrai – Amiens Area to combat enemy dive bombers which were targeting the French Armed Forces in this area, as well as protection AASF aerodromes and covering day bomber operations. Daily patrols were also carried out in the Reims Area to cover French reconnaissance and counter dive bombers on the Aisne Front. Aircraft that operated in the Somme Area, were re-fuelled and re-armed and often remained overnight at the aerodromes of Rouen-Boos, Étrépagny and Estree St. Denis for maintenance.²⁶⁷

What is clear from all this is that the fortunes of the RAF and other Allied air forces were mixed during this phase of the battle. Ultimately, they were unable to prevent the German forces from pushing the BEF from Belgium all the way to northern France and were often outmatched by the Luftwaffe's vicious attacks. For instance, during this phase of the battle, the night of 18 May 1940 saw a heavy bombing raid on the port of Calais. The fires which resulted from this attack proved useful to other nearby Luftwaffe bombers, who were able to find the port at night without any difficulty.²⁶⁸ Evidently, they were outmatched by the Luftwaffe, just like how the BEF would be outmatched by the German forces on the ground. However, there were several instances where the RAF had success in their offensives, to the point where they could have disrupted the enemy's advance, although not enough to halt their pursuit of the BEF or their advance across Europe. This does mean that any successes the RAF or Allied air forces had would amount to very little in the long run; the BEF had still been

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ TNA: AIR 20/2066 - Plans for operations and evacuation of Dunkirk.

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forced into a fighting retreat all the way to northern France, eventually being cornered at Dunkirk.

Fortunately, by the time the BEF were cornered in northern France with only Dunkirk left as an Allied stronghold, plans were already in place for the evacuation of Allied troops. These plans involved the RA, who were tasked with overseeing and protecting the evacuation by carrying out patrols. Evidently, the RAF would have been left at a disadvantage, to a certain extent, given their losses in the Battle of France so far. This, however, would not stop them from playing a part, and an important one at that.

The RAF at Operation Dynamo, 26 May – 4 June 1940

Operation Dynamo commenced on the evening of 26 May 1940, ending on 4 June 1940, although further rescue attempts were still made later. Both the RAF and the Royal Navy were active at Dunkirk, assisted by the Little Ships of Dunkirk; it was planned that the Royal Navy would primarily rescue the BEF soldiers from the beaches and port of Dunkirk, while the RAF would provide cover for the ships and soldiers from the skies. Over the nine days of the operation, 171 reconnaissance, 651 bombing and 2,739 fighter sorties²⁶⁹ were carried out by the RAF over and around Dunkirk, primarily using a range of Hurricane, Spitfire and Defiant aircraft.

Before the commencement of the evacuation, the Luftwaffe had achieved air supremacy in northern France by 24 May, the only exception being along the Channel Coast. This had caused significant problems for the RAF and arguably looked set to hamper their involvement in Operation Dynamo. Indeed, during Operation Dynamo, the RAF faced plenty of struggles, worsened by their losses and difficulties during the Battle of France beforehand. They regularly crossed the channel regularly with the intent to break up the German air attack on the beaches. However, limited fuel reserves only allowed RAF fighters a short amount of time to wage a battle against the Luftwaffe before being forced to return to their bases. The average amount of time RAF craft would have in the air per day ranged from 1.7 to 2.1 hours.²⁷⁰

These issues were likely not as problematic as they could have been, as the RAF primarily used bases on the Kent Coast that would allow for short journeys. RAF

²⁶⁹ Dunkirk: 1940 – Air War Over the Lower Countries - <http://dunkirk1940.org/index.php?&p=1> 15.

²⁷⁰ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 204.

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Manston, Hornchurch, Hawkinge, Detling, Gravesend and Lympne were the main airfields used, with the distances to Dunkirk being between 75km and 135km.²⁷¹ But problems remained. When launching from Gravesend, Hornchurch, Hawkinge and Manston, the flight time of fighters to reach patrol area, at a fuel-conserving speed of 180mph, and including ten minutes to assemble the squadron's formation, was 30 minutes. This would leave approximately 20 minutes of flight time for patrol for the Spitfires launching from Gravesend and Hornchurch and 40 minutes for Hurricanes starting from Hawkinge and Manston, with 20 minutes of fuel for the journey back to base. As a result, when one squadron had to begin its return flight, its replacement squadron was in the process of launching, leaving as much as 30 minutes when no British fighters were over Dunkirk or the Allies' defence perimeter.²⁷²

According to an Operations Record Book from RAF 2 Squadron, based at Hornchurch at the time, from 31 May to 2 June 1940, all aircraft of this squadron's operation were in the air for one hour. The record lists the aircraft patrols as being tasked with locating enemy batteries and positions of sunken ships at Dunkirk, reporting on the condition of the moles, the positions of an emergency jetty that was being built on the adjoining beach and on the visibility at Dunkirk. Given the distance they had to travel to Dunkirk and the tasks that were required of their patrols, the fuel capacity issue would have proved to be problematic. According to the same record, however, the pilots on these missions were able to carry out their tasks, although it remains likely that the limited fuel capacity would still have given the mission time constraints.²⁷³

According to an Operations Record Book for 19 Squadron, on 1 June 1940, the sorties for these squadrons on offensive patrols around Dunkirk were airborne between 1 hour and 10 minutes and 2 hours and 25 minutes.²⁷⁴ Clearly, their aircraft, consisting of Spitfires, were able to stay in the air for longer than those of 2 Squadron. While the reason for this could be because they were required to do more in these patrols, attacking Luftwaffe patrols that were trying to throw the evacuation into disarray, it could also be because they had less distance to travel and so would

²⁷¹ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 33.

²⁷² Douglas C. Dildy, *The Luftwaffe's Campaign to Destroy RAF Fighter Command*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2020), 67.

²⁷³ TNA: AIR 27/19/12 - Record of Events: RAF 2 Squadron.

²⁷⁴ TNA: AIR 27/252/19 - Record of Events: RAF 19 Squadron.

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not have been as limited with time. However, limited fuel capacity evidently still had its problems as not all the aircraft stayed in the air for the same period. This is most likely due to encountering Luftwaffe craft during these patrols. According to the Record Book for RAF 254 Squadron, planes on patrol around the Dunkirk on 1 June 1950 were in the air between 1 hour 25 minutes and 2 hours 7 minutes. These patrols encountered enemy aircraft, it is likely many of its aircraft has its time in the air cut short because of fuel consumption after encountering the enemy aircraft.²⁷⁵ Similarly, as reported in the Operations Record Book for RAF 54 Squadron, their aircraft would be airborne for up to two hours during their Patrols of the Northern French coast.²⁷⁶

Interestingly, a letter regarding the employment of additional British Fighter Squadrons to France from Group Captain S.C. Strafford, dated 1 June 1940, gives an indication that the situation regarding fuel capacity and time airborne could have ended up being worse. He mentions ‘it was fortunate that the area over which this [air] cover was so urgently required was within their radius of action’.²⁷⁷ Even if they had limited time over the coast of Northern France, the targets were still in their operational radius.

Regardless of distance and journey times, these issues still resulted in long stretches during the day when there would be no fighter cover at all. This was despite the aim being ‘to maintain continuous patrols in strength over Dunkirk and the beaches three miles to the east and west of it and provide support for the BEF’.²⁷⁸ Air Chief Marshall Lord Hugh Dowding had insisted that this initial aim was quite impossible, as he believed Britain’s air defence was ‘at cracking point’, arguing that ‘if this exceptional effort [over Dunkirk] had to be repeated the following days, the situation would be serious.’²⁷⁹ RAF Marshall Cyril Newall insisted, however, that Dowding should do what he was told, but if Newall wanted to maintain continuous cover in strength, he had to order Dowding to temporarily disregard the danger to the rest of the country and

²⁷⁵ TNA: AIR 27/1514/12 - Record of Events: Squadron Number 54.

²⁷⁶ TNA: AIR 27/716/15 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 88.

²⁷⁷ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Strafford’s Papers.

²⁷⁸ Baughen, *RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain*, 208.

²⁷⁹ John Kelly, *Never Surrender: Winston Churchill and Britain’s Decision to Fight Nazi Germany in the Fateful Summer of 1940* (New York: Scribner Book Company, 2016), 240.

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move more squadrons into the south-east.²⁸⁰ However, he chose not to and Dowding ignored the order to provide continuous air cover. Although this decision did not benefit Operation Dynamo, the events that occurred later in 1940 proved Dowding made the right decisions in the long run. The Battle of Britain (which lasted from June until October 1940, and which will be explored in-depth in Chapter Four) would see Germany commence its next phase of European invasion, a phase that included attempting to gain air superiority over Britain. This saw the Luftwaffe, particularly in the late stages of the battle, carrying out major air attacks on Britain. As a result, the RAF was vital in combatting the Luftwaffe once again, and this time on a much wider scale.

It is also possible that the RAF may not have been entirely aware of the situation at Dunkirk, as John Harris argues;

‘The RAF was there all right but, curiously, many of them knew remarkably little about what was going on... the Army had laid such a screen of secrecy over the evacuation, most of the airmen had no idea that the beaches were filling with exhausted men.’²⁸¹

This could explain why the decision was made not to establish regular patrols over Dunkirk. The strength of the German Luftwaffe could also have proved difficult to predict, as Sir Keith Park had no means of seeing the build-up and approach of the German aircraft before the RAF craft reached their targets. Therefore, it was not possible for him to deploy fighter aircraft economically by sending them on targeted interceptions. As mentioned in Chapter Two, prior to the Battle of Britain, there was a lack of effective radar systems. A despatch by Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey, from 18 June 1940, indicates that RAF operations at and around Dunkirk were outside the range of controlled interceptions provided by radar stations in Britain. The despatch further mentions the only reasonable course of action would be to arrange patrols and to trust these would be able to intercept or perhaps discourage enemy air attacks. This indicates that the RAF patrols were flown without prior knowledge of the

²⁸⁰ Greg Baughen, *RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain*, 20.

²⁸¹ John Harris, *Dunkirk: The Epic Story of History's Most Extraordinary Rescue* (London: Canelo History Press, 2021), 84.

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situation at or around Dunkirk, inevitably leading to absences at crucial moments. The same despatch by Ramsay also mentions how the Luftwaffe had the initiative and could 'choose the time of their attacks'.²⁸² This intriguing point suggests that these patrols could have been spontaneous, indicated further by Park not being able to see the approach of German aircraft. Indeed, on 28 May 1940, it is reported that 12 aircraft from 41 Squadron carried out offensive patrols over Dunkirk, but no enemy aircraft were encountered, although anti-aircraft fire was encountered from shore batteries.²⁸³

At first, the patrols flown over Dunkirk would consist of two squadrons on average, each squadron having an average of twelve craft, as previously mentioned. However, the Luftwaffe's formations would be larger than that of the RAF's patrols, and so, on 29 May 1940, Air Marshall, Sir Keith Park, changed tactics to combat the larger Luftwaffe formations. The RAF patrols would be adjusted to have four squadrons around Dunkirk at any one time. Patrols would be broken up into single squadrons or pairs of squadrons, with part of the patrol operating below the cloud cover while others provided top cover. It is likely that this tactic was drawn up due to the Luftwaffe preferring to fly below cloud; this method would, in theory, give the RAF a tactical advantage and allow for more effective dogfights. However, even if flying both above and below cloud cover gave the RAF an advantage, this tactic did lead to ineffective support between squadrons at different heights. It would become easy for squadrons to become separated in the cloud, with the full structure of the patrol being wasted, as the individual planes could become easy targets. For instance, on 31 May 1940, the formation of a patrol being carried out by RAF 222 Squadron broke up because of the layers of cloud present. Pilot Officer Vigors from this patrol reported that he engaged with a Heinkel aircraft at a height of 2,000 feet between two layers of cloud.²⁸⁴

Pilot Officer Norman Hancock of RAF 1 Squadron gives the following insight into the disorganisation of such patrols, demonstrating just how easy it was for the separation of squadrons to occur;

²⁸² TNA: CAB 106/258 - Despatch on operation "Dynamo" by Vice-Admiral Sir Bertram H. Ramsay, Flag Officer Commanding, Dover (Supplement to London Gazette 38017) (H.M. Stationery Office 1947).

²⁸³ TNA: AIR 27/424/15 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 41.

²⁸⁴ TNA: AIR 27/1371/1 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 222.

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‘You went as a squadron towards your target. You were in appropriate formation but once you’d engaged the enemy then by and large people tended to split up. You might get the odd pair who stayed together, but by and large the squadron was split up and individually attacked targets. You didn’t stay as a solid machine of 12 aeroplanes pointing in the right direction. It didn’t work that way... everyone disappeared... [after the first attack] there was no cohesion to the squadron.’²⁸⁵

As established in Chapter Two, the flying conditions over Dunkirk were, at times, very bad, with heavy clouds and thick smoke from the bombed town and numerous wrecks drifting in the bay. This would even prove difficult for pilots already experienced in combat operations as part of large formations.²⁸⁶ Strong cloud cover would also be present, which could make flying conditions difficult. This started to become particularly evident on 29 May 1940, with the weather on this day reportedly being cloudy and overcast; visibility was reportedly poor to moderate, with the wind being calm and northerly.²⁸⁷ However, these adverse conditions became particularly evident for both sides of the conflict on 30 May 1940. Adverse weather had been present before, but this day would prove to be much worse. Fog and sea mist rolled in and merged with the billowing smoke at Dunkirk. Sighting enemy aircraft became virtually impossible for the RAF patrols²⁸⁸ as there were no reports of any enemy aircraft sightings from them, despite fifteen squadrons being active on this day.²⁸⁹ Evidently, the Luftwaffe had this issue as well, as it became near-impossible for both high-level bombing and even dive-bombing by the Luftwaffe. However, this would end up being a day that arguably worked in the Allies’ favour, even if hampered by the poor weather. Although further bombing attacks by the Luftwaffe had been planned and later cancelled, there was minimal Luftwaffe activity compared to previous days. There were no air attacks at all in the morning, with the only Luftwaffe activity happening later in the day when ships began arriving in quantity in the afternoon. Even then, as the weather was still poor, Luftwaffe craft did not carry out attacks in large

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 21.

²⁸⁷ TNA: AIR 27/424/15 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 41.

²⁸⁸ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 137.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, 138.

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numbers, allowing for the day's evacuation proceedings to go smoothly.²⁹⁰ As a result, minimal damage was done to vessels involved in the evacuation. Fighter Command suffered no losses due to aircraft activity, with the Luftwaffe losing two aircraft on this day.²⁹¹

Many of the RAF pilots at this time were also young and inexperienced in comparison to much of the Luftwaffe's personnel, most of which were battle-hardened veterans. While these RAF pilots fought valiantly at Dunkirk, many of them would become overwhelmed by the power of the German Luftwaffe.²⁹² The struggles of the RAF was made even more difficult by RAF fighter pilots being under clear instructions to not intervene with any attacks on the ground, as air defence was regarded as the priority.²⁹³ As implied in the previous chapter, many fighter pilots expressed their frustration at this order, as many saw no reason why they could not expend their unused ammunition on the ground targets before heading back. This frustration at following the command is understandable, as the German ground forces would also be responsible for shooting down RAF craft as much as the RAF was, contributing to the large number of RAF aircraft shot down. Even then, fighting the Luftwaffe in the skies was not without its difficulties. Their Ju-87 dive bombers often evaded the high-flying RAF patrols, which often flew above cloud while the Luftwaffe usually flew below, giving them advantage.²⁹⁴

Even before Operation Dynamo and the Battle of France, the RAF and Fighter Command faced existing problems. Aviation historian Paul Beaver believes that, despite growing in strength towards the end, the RAF was not well-prepared for the Second World War during its early years, arguing that they were 'not well placed to defend Britain's skies as the country entered the Second World War.'²⁹⁵ He believes that the RAF's shortcomings dated back to before the war; 'the young flying service, just 20 years old, had suffered two decades of under-investment, weak leadership and

²⁹⁰ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

²⁹¹ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 177.

²⁹² The RAF's vital role in the Dunkirk Evacuation - <https://www.rafbf.org/news-and-blogs/rafs-vital-role-dunkirk-evacuation>.

²⁹³ Greg Baughen, *the RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain*, 95.

²⁹⁴ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 142.

²⁹⁵ Air Power: From Dunkirk to D-Day - <https://www.forces.net/news/raf/air-power-dunkirk-d-day>.

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the constant fight to prevent the other two services closing it down'²⁹⁶, in turn leading to the RAF arguably not quite being adequately prepared for such an undertaking.

He goes on to speak about how the RAF, particularly Fighter Command, ended up struggling at Dunkirk and the Battle of France;

'Over Dunkirk and the Channel in May 1940, Fighter Command was outnumbered and unable to protect the beaches... its pilots were inexperienced and its command unused to the new form of rapid intervention air warfare at which the Luftwaffe excelled... Bomber Command was finding it hard to find and hit targets and Coastal Command was not equipped with the right aircraft'²⁹⁷

Despite the limitations facing them, this did not stop the RAF from being very active at and around Dunkirk. These statistics from RAF No. 11 Group at Dunkirk can give a good indication of the daily RAF activity, the patrols that were flown, the hours spent in the air and their action against the Luftwaffe forces.

Date	Patrols Flown	Hours Flown	Enemy Aircraft Destroyed	Enemy Aircraft Driven Down
26 May 1940	22	480	30	20
27 May 1940	23	536	48	32
28 May 1940	11	576	20	6
29 May 1940	9	674	78	8
30 May 1940	9	704	0	0
31 May 1940	8	490	36	4
1 June 1940	8	558	69	0
2 June 1940	4	231	16	6
3 June 1940	4	339	0	0

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

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4 June 1940	3	234	0	0
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*Table 1: Activity of Fighter Group 11 at Dunkirk, 26 May – 4 June 1940.*²⁹⁸

However, doubt can be casted on the figures shown above. As spoken about in Chapter One, there was a determined effort by the media, through the Ministry of Information, to paint all aspects of Operation Dynamo in a very positive light, leading to some bias and exaggerations. Though these figures come from an official War Office document and most likely came straight from Fighter Command, therefore giving no reason for bias or exaggeration, such information could have been given to newspaper and radio outlets at the time, for them to report on the evacuation's events. With this determined effort to report as positively as possible on Operation Dynamo, these figures are likely to have included 'probables' and been gathered before exact numbers could be given. It is also a possibility that Fighter Command may have wanted to give the War Office reassurance, by making it seem the RAF was really making an impact against the Luftwaffe. Perhaps the most telling sign of its inaccuracies, deliberate or not, is the inconsistency with the official number of Luftwaffe aircraft casualties at Dunkirk, which stands at 132; the total amounts shown above are clearly higher than this.

This table, however, can still serve as a good indication of the RAF's effectiveness. With many of the casualties listed above likely to be 'probables' and likely coming straight from a reliable source, with the intention of being kept confidential, it also seems unlikely these figures were deliberately exaggerated. It would not have been easy to count the exact number of Luftwaffe casualties straight away. With the high numbers recorded, this can give an indication of the daily amount of damage that was dealt to the Luftwaffe by the RAF.

The evacuation began on 26 May and saw a total of 13 Fighter Command squadrons in use at Dunkirk. As Table 1 can imply, the RAF's actions got off to a good start with a high number of casualties suggested by the questionable but indicative figure of 50 Luftwaffe casualties.

²⁹⁸ TNA: WO 222/1530 - Dynamo plan.

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27 May 1940 was the first full day of the evacuation and saw a good 16 squadrons in action at Dunkirk.²⁹⁹ It is clear the Luftwaffe was already being regarded as a significant threat right from the first full day, as a telegram from Admiralty requested for the operation to be continuous and use all types of aircraft available, with Dunkirk reportedly being bombed once an hour.³⁰⁰ Another telegram to the War Office from the Officer in Charge at Dunkirk, sent at 16:55hrs, mentions ‘complete fighter protection over Dunkirk [is] now essential if a serious disaster is to be avoided’.³⁰¹ This gives a clear indication of how vital the RAF was seen to be for Operation Dynamo to be a successful rescue mission and how intense the Luftwaffe’s attacks had already become. Indeed, there would be twelve major attacks on Dunkirk by the Luftwaffe, using 300 bombers and 550 escort fighter sorties, which dropped 15,000 pounds of high explosives and 30,000 pounds of incendiaries.³⁰²

The main port of Dunkirk, from which it was planned to also carry out evacuations, was put out of action by heavy bombing.³⁰³ This would have caused the evacuation difficulty from the start, as it left only the beaches available to utilise for Operation Dynamo. Twenty-one RAF craft were lost.³⁰⁴ However, as Table 1 indicates, a significant amount of Luftwaffe aircraft were lost, a number that could have been around 80 if Table 1 is to be believed. Despite the shortcomings that they faced during and before the evacuation, they were still able to deal damage to the enemy right from the start of the operation. Because of this, the Luftwaffe had very little impact on the evacuation on this day, with only one evacuation vessel, Queen of the Channel, being sunk.³⁰⁵

The RAF’s successful actions, and the number of Luftwaffe bombers being shot down being higher than the number of RAF bombers shot down, made the Luftwaffe step up its fighter cover over Dunkirk. This led to lone RAF squadrons around Dunkirk often

²⁹⁹ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 204.

³⁰⁰ TNA: AIR 15/203 - Evacuation of Dunkirk: Air support.

³⁰¹ TNA: WO 106/1607 - Channel Ports, Defence of Dunkirk.

³⁰² Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation*, 93.

³⁰³ Charles More, *The Road to Dunkirk, the British Expeditionary Forces in France* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2013), 303.

³⁰⁴ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 174.

³⁰⁵ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

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finding themselves outnumbered.³⁰⁶ The RAF would also step up its tactics in response to this. Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park used multi-squadron formations to combat the stronger German fighter escorts. Two squadrons had initially been used, often with a higher Spitfire squadron covering smaller Hurricane squadrons, but this would change to formations of up to four squadrons being used. Some squadrons even began copying the German formations with fighters working together in pairs.³⁰⁷ As a result of this, the RAF was arguably the victors of the air battle on this day.

The sharp decrease in the number of patrols shown in Table 1 suggests that there was comparatively less RAF activity on 28 May. More squadrons, 18 in total, were active on this day than on 27 May and managed to maintain a strong air cover, but there were still problems the RAF faced. There was poor weather and cloud cover over Dunkirk, as well as a heavy pall of smoke from the burning town covering the operation for much of the day, something that would have proved challenging for both sides of the conflict. Luftwaffe actions against the RAF from the previous day were already starting to take a toll on Fighter Command. As well as the aircraft that was lost to the Luftwaffe, many of the Spitfires and Hurricanes were damaged during patrols and dogfights, some being filled with holes and needing repair.³⁰⁸ This made things even more difficult for the RAF, as Squadron Leader J. Worrall of 32 Squadron has noted;

‘Frequently aircraft needed repair after being shot up which might take days. Allocations of replacement aircraft took a day or two and they needed careful inspection to ensure everything ticked before flying in combat – guns tested, sights harmonised, RT correctly crystalised and so on’³⁰⁹

This was not the only difficulty faced, as Worrall adds to this;

‘Also, there were aircraft available, but pilots had been wounded. Newly arrived pilots lacked experience and were given further training on the squadron before being flown operationally... it was necessary to make up to ten or twelve aircraft by pooling resources – ergo composite squadrons.’³¹⁰

³⁰⁶ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 139.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 142-4.

³⁰⁸ Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation*, 93.

³⁰⁹ Norman Franks, *Air Battle for Dunkirk*, 186.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*.

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Although the Luftwaffe downed 13 RAF craft, less than the number of craft they lost on this day, they arguably had more success than the previous day. Their primary actions were bombing the town and port of Dunkirk, causing much damage. This attack was, fortunately, on a smaller scale as the Luftwaffe had another ambition on 28 May, which was intensely focused on attacking Ostend and Nieuport in Belgium, where the final stages of the Battle of Belgium were taking place.

The issues addressed by Worrall appear to have been continuous throughout the evacuation, with Table 1 implying a gradual decrease of RAF activity throughout. Indeed, 31 May 1940 would see 15 Squadrons active at Dunkirk,³¹¹ less than on previous days, and 21 RAF aircraft would be lost to enemy aircraft action.³¹²

What is also made clear from this list is how the limitations still affected the RAF in some way. While the number of flying hours increased between 26 and 30 May, the number of patrols flown decreased and continued to decrease through to 4 June 1940. Furthermore, after 30 May, the flying hours continually increase and decrease through to 4 June. The gradual decrease of patrols throughout the evacuation shown in the table can suggest that there was comparatively less RAF presence as the evacuation continued. It appears this was indeed the case, especially as on 29 May 1940, the decision was made for the RAF to cut back on its protection during periods of the day that were regarded as less important, due to their resources being insufficient to provide continuous air cover.³¹³ While 16 squadrons were active at Dunkirk on this day,³¹⁴ many of these squadrons would be 'stretched thin' and not always able to provide full-time cover over Dunkirk.³¹⁵ Inevitably, this led to less RAF presence than the previous days. This was noticed by the Luftwaffe, already a continuous and relentless presence, continuously attacking troops on the beaches and the vessels rescuing them. It was on this day that their most severe attacks came when a massive number of ships were present in Dunkirk Harbour. The opportunity to attack was seized by the Luftwaffe that afternoon, when around 400 aircraft headed for Dunkirk, led by 180 Stukas, arrived at the beaches at 15:00hrs. There was no sign of any RAF

³¹¹ Ibid, 204.

³¹² Ibid, 177.

³¹³ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

³¹⁴ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 204.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 174.

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craft, and the Luftwaffe had a clear view of the beaches below. This description from Walter Lord shows just how easily the RAF was able to target the beaches;

‘Corporal Hans Mahnert, a gunner-radio operator flying with Stuka Wing No. 3, looked down on a remarkable sight. Ships were crowded together everywhere... other more practiced eyes scanned the sea. They may have missed the eastern mole [where troops were evacuated from] before, but not today... there – directly below – was a sight no one could overlook. Clustered along the mole were a dozen ships. It was hard to imagine a better target.’³¹⁶

The attack commenced and was continuous for over two hours, which saw many Navy and civilian vessels being damaged or destroyed by their actions:

List of Vessels sunk or damaged by Luftwaffe activity – 29 May 1940³¹⁷

- Special Service Vessel Crested Eagle – bombed and set on fire, ship beached and gutted
- Personnel Vessel Normania – sunk
- Personnel Vessel Lorinia – sunk
- Personnel Vessel Fenella – sunk
- Paddle Minesweeper Waverley – sunk, bombed for 1½ hours
- Trawler Polly Johnson – sunk
- Paddle Minesweeper Gracie Fields – sunk
- Danlayer Nautilus – sunk
- Destroyer Intrepid – continuously bombed, one boiler room was put out of action
- Destroyer Bideford – attacked, bomb hit stern and put her out of action
- Destroyer Pangbourne – damaged below water line by several near misses, necessitating dockyard repairs
- Destroyer Greyhound – damaged by near miss

³¹⁶ Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 173.

³¹⁷ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

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- Destroyer Saladin – attacked 10 times by bombers, severely damaged and put out of action
- Destroyer Kellett – damaged
- Destroyer Gallant – damaged
- Destroyer Jaguar – damaged
- Personnel Vessel St. Seiriol – damaged
- Personnel Vessel Canterbury – damaged
- Destroyer Wolfhound – damaged

The eastern mole, the long stone structure where the troops were being evacuated from, was also badly damaged after being strafed and bombed by the Luftwaffe, causing a setback for the evacuation. The attack was so ferocious, and on such a large scale, that by 17:20hrs, forty Luftwaffe craft were reported to still be in the Dunkirk area.³¹⁸ All this damage resulted in the Admiralty deciding to withdraw the remaining eight modern destroyers that were at Dunkirk that evening, although this order would be rescinded the next day.³¹⁹

Another large-scale attack from the Luftwaffe occurred on 1 June, an attack which saw all ships in Dunkirk, whether off the beaches or in the approaching channels, subjected every two hours to an unprecedented scale of air attack in such numbers. This account from Lieutenant D’Arcy McClough, from 9 Field Company of the Royal Engineers, most likely from 1 June, gives a clear picture of the Luftwaffe’s brutality;

‘The Luftwaffe was very active. They were dive-bombing any worthwhile target, such as the mole and the ships out to sea. During the course of an afternoon I counted up to 180 bombs unloaded by Stuka attacks on a ship about two miles out which, I discovered, had already been sunk two days before.’³²⁰

Such was the scale of the assault that the RAF was unable to effectively deal with the situation,³²¹ even though Fighter Command was able to use 17 squadrons and manage

³¹⁸ TNA: AIR 81/692 - Sergeant J C Harrison: report of death; Hurricane P2876 in air operations near Dunkirk, France, 29 May 1940.

³¹⁹ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 204.

³²⁰ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk*, 231.

³²¹ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

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275 aircraft sorties.³²² The heavy bombardment from the Luftwaffe was so damaging that it caused evacuations to cease during hours of daylight from 2 June onwards.³²³

Following the decision to not carry out the evacuation in hours of daylight, the Air Ministry asked the RAF to provide strong continuous patrols over Dunkirk and its beaches from 04:30hrs to 08:30hrs on 2 June 1940, as well as night fighter patrols during the hours of darkness. It was arranged for fighter patrols to go out over the routes being used by ships and on the return journey to fly low on these routes so maximum protection could be given against ships from machine gun and low flying bomb attacks. This concentration of fighter patrols during periods of dawn and dusk resulted in a decrease in flying hours on 2 June 1940. This could have worked in the RAF's favour, as it is likely this would have led to the previously mentioned issues that plagued the RAF being less apparent for the remainder of the evacuation. The first two main RAF patrols on this day, at a strength of four squadrons, encountered no Luftwaffe aircraft and, reportedly, no ships were being attacked during this period.

However, the third patrol, which was the strongest yet flown, consisted of five squadrons at full strength and was over the Dunkirk area from 07:45hrs to 08:45hrs. This patrol encountered a significant number of Luftwaffe aircraft and claimed to have downed 18 bombers and 10 fighters while losing seven aircraft of their own. Despite the RAF's claim, no reports of attacks came from any ships in the vicinity and there were no apparent attacks that occurred until the *Calcutta*, out on patrol, was attacked at 10:35hrs by 3 Junker Bombers, which dive-bombed it. No direct hits were made but several near misses, which did cause slight damage. The coastal patrol, which witnessed the incident, managed to drive off the Luftwaffe attackers. The French light cruiser, *Epervier*, and destroyer, *Leopard*, were also out on patrol at the time but left the patrol between 10:35hrs and 14:42hrs. Reportedly, nothing more was seen that day regarding enemy attacks or patrols made to counter these.³²⁴ Clearly, Luftwaffe activity was significantly more limited compared to previous days. This could have been down to the minimal evacuation activity on this day. There were limited Navy patrols and only RAF patrols in the early hours, while the Luftwaffe was still doing

³²² Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk*, 177.

³²³ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

³²⁴ TNA: ADM 234/360 - Evacuation from Dunkirk (Operation Dynamo) 26 May - 4 June 1940.

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everything that it could to impede the evacuation as they still launched attacks on these patrols. It seems more than likely that the efforts the Luftwaffe made to disrupt the evacuation the previous day would have been made yet again had daylight evacuations continued. This may not have been the only reason as the RAF continued its defensive attacks on the Luftwaffe. On 2 June, it is reported that 92 Squadron, because of good weather that day, had success over the French coast. Their patrols downed 14 enemy bombers and four fighters without any losses to their own squadron, a dogfight that the Operations Record Book for 92 Squadron likens to 'a grand show'.³²⁵

Regardless of this change and how it prevented further onslaughts and despite the reasons for less Luftwaffe activity, the damage of the previous day had still been done;

List of vessels sunk or damaged – Saturday 1 June³²⁶

- Minesweeper Salamander – damaged by bombs
- Personnel Vessel Prague – damaged
- Destroyer Havant – sunk
- Personnel Vessel Scotia – sunk
- Gunboat Mosquito – sunk
- Trawler Westward Ho! – slight damage by near misses
- Destroyer Worcester – damaged by enemy bombing attack
- Corvette Kingfisher – damaged by enemy bombing attack and rendered unseaworthy in rough weather
- Destroyer Ivanhoe – damaged by aircraft bombing attack, taken in tow and proceeded to Sheerness
- Destroyer Vivacious – damaged by aircraft bombing attack, returned to Dover under own steam
- Personnel Vessel Mona's Isle – on way to Dunkirk was straddled by enemy shore batteries and attacked by dive bombers, all near misses, but caused damage with steam pipes later found to be leaking and found to be making water in No. 2 stokehold

³²⁵ TNA: AIR 27/743/3 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 92.

³²⁶ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

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- Minesweeper Skipjack – was embarking troops when came under continuous air attack, 250-300 troops embarked when ship hit several times, orders given to abandon ship and turned over within two minute, most troops lost having been put below, those in water machine-gunned
- Destroyer Basilisk – was embarking troops and attacked by enemy aircraft, hit in boiler room and put out of action, another attack later on took place but no hits registered, third attack took place and ship began to settle and order to abandon ship given
- Destroyer Keith – attacked by enemy aircraft, was severely hit and abandoned

The number of vessels sunk or damaged on both these days are indications of just how strong the Luftwaffe's presence was. This is even more apparent when the amount damaged or sunk on other days of the evacuation are taken into consideration:

- Tuesday 28 May 1940 – vessels sunk or damaged³²⁷
 - Flare-burning Drifter Paxton – damaged
 - Flare-burning Drifter Boy Roy – damaged
 - Destroyer Windsor – bombed with damage to hull and aerials
 - Personnel Vessel Queen of the Channel – sunk by bombing attack
- Thursday 30 May – vessels sunk or damaged³²⁸
 - Destroyer Sabre – damaged
 - Destroyer Anthony – badly damaged, had to be sent under tow to dockyard for repair
 - Hospital Carrier St Julian – damaged by near misses
 - Armed Boarding Vessel King Orry – severely damaged by near miss bombs inside Dunkirk Harbour, and finally foundered when taken out of harbour
- Friday 31 May – vessels sunk or damaged³²⁹

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

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- Minesweeper Devonian – damaged from near miss bombs, ship later beached and abandoned
- Minesweeper Hebe –damaged
- Destroyer Express – damaged

- Sunday 2 June 1940 – ships sunk/damaged³³⁰
 - A/S Trawler Cape Argona – damaged by near misses whilst on patrol
 - A.A. Cruiser Calcutta – had many near misses whilst out on patrol off beaches, which did minor damage
 - Personnel Vessel Royal Daffodil – bombed whilst off Dunkirk and damaged, but returned under own steam
 - Destroyer Sabre – attacked by enemy aircraft and received damage, able to return to harbour under own steam

The figures that have been presented, both for Luftwaffe damage to vessels and activity of RAF 11 Group, correlate with each other, as they give an indication of Allied and enemy activity at Dunkirk. On 29 May, only nine patrols were flown, less than the 22 and 23 flown on 26 May and 27 May respectively, most likely because of the problems the RAF was facing. It also indicates that there was less of an RAF presence at Dunkirk, which could serve as a reason why there was so much damage done to vessels by Luftwaffe aircraft that day. The same can be said for 1 June, as only eight patrols were flown and there was also a high number of vessels sunk or damaged along with continuous Luftwaffe activity, again indicating there was a smaller RAF presence.

Further indications of this are present in a Ministry of Defence Report regarding air cooperation. It mentioned that the system of cooperation between Naval and RAF Command was poor, with delays and lags occurring. This often resulted in RAF efforts being in the wrong place or at the wrong time, or with inadequate forces to meet the current situation at the time, not helped by the ever-changing situations at Dunkirk.³³¹

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

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The report is, overall, critical of the RAF's role and suggests they did not have much of a presence as they should have;

‘Not only did unopposed German air effort interrupt and reduce seaborne traffic, but also prevented embarkation by suspending troop movement... to both Naval and Military observers on the coast, full air protection was expected, but instead, for hours on end the ships offshore were subjected to a murderous hail of bombs and machine gun bullets... in their reports, Commanding Officers of many ships, while giving credit to RAF personnel for gallantry in such combats as were observed from ships, at same time expressing sense of disappointment and surprise at seemingly puny efforts made to provide air protection during the height of the operation’³³²

Although no dates are mentioned in the report, it is very likely that this could have included, or even been about, the 29 May and 1 June, further explaining how those two days had the highest number of vessel casualties because of the Luftwaffe.

However, less RAF activity may not be the only reason for the Luftwaffe's actions on 29 May and 1 June. One of the setbacks the RAF faced was having smaller patrol formations than the Luftwaffe, which resulted in the RAF often being outnumbered. The M.O.D report that talks scathingly about the RAF also suggests this was often the case;

‘As one Commanding officer remarks, the formations of our own fighters when operating over the area were so outnumbered by enemy aircraft that it was no surprise to the observer to note more British machines were shot down than were enemy’³³³

It is very likely that this would have applied to 29 May and 1 June. The Luftwaffe having a particularly heavy presence is also inferred by the RAF 11 Group statistics presented earlier. The highest number of Luftwaffe craft being destroyed or shot down by them was on 29 May, at 86, with the second highest being on 1 June, at 59. This suggests that there was a high number of Luftwaffe craft present at Dunkirk on those days. Furthermore, the number of hours flown on 29 May is higher than that of the

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

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previous days, being at 674 compared with 480, 536 and 576 for the 26, 27 and 28 May respectively. This suggests that a lot more dogfights took place on these three days. For 1 June, the number of total hours flown was 558, although not as high as 30 May and 31 May, at 704, it can also suggest the RAF was heavily present. It is likely that the RAF could have been outmatched by the Luftwaffe, especially as there were continuous attacks from them on that day.

Furthermore, the Royal Navy also played a role in defending against the Luftwaffe at Dunkirk, managing to down a number of planes, albeit not as many as the RAF;³³⁴

Day	Aircraft shot down by Navy
27 May 1940	4
28 May 1940	3
29 May 1940	4
30 May 1940	0
31 May 1940	11
1 June 1940	13
2 June 1940	0
3 June 1940	0
4 June 1940	0

*Table 2: Enemy aircraft shot down by the Royal Navy at Dunkirk, 27 May – 4 June 1940*³³⁵

The highest number of planes shot down was again on 1 June 1940, the day with the most attacks from the Luftwaffe. The numbers falling to zero for the last days of the evacuation can be attributed to the evacuation only being carried out at night.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ TNA: WO 222/1530 - Dynamo plan.

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Moreover, the small numbers before 31 May suggest that the RAF was primarily tasked with the role of defence, while the Navy had the secondary role of defence; its primary role was to evacuate British and Allied troops. The high numbers of aircraft shot down on 31 May and 1 June implies that there was not as much RAF presence as there was on previous days.

A heavy Luftwaffe presence on some days more than others can also be implied by the number of troops that were evacuated each day.

Date	BEF Troops			Allied Troops			Total
	Fit	Casualties	Total	Fit	Casualties	Total	
27 May 1940	3,324	1,250	4,570	4	0	4	4,578
28 May 1940	14,444	505	14,946	57	0	57	15,005
29 May 1940	37,456	1,507	38,963			753	39,716
30 May 1940	36,992	976	37,898			8,057	45,955
31 May 1940	46,158	1,390	47,548			12,249	59,797
1 June 1940	29,502	2,022	31,524	29,479	795	30,274	61,998
2 June 1940	14,238	122	14,360	12,441	0	12,441	26,801

Table 3: Daily totals of British and Allied troops evacuated 27 May 1940 – 2 June 1940³³⁶

³³⁶ TNA: AIR 20/2066 - Plans for operations and evacuation of Dunkirk.

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From 27 May to 1 June, the numbers of those evacuated continuously increased until 2 June when it dropped from 61,998 to 26,801, something that can be attributed to having the evacuation only take place at night from that day onwards. It is also worth noting how the numbers of casualties continually increase and decrease throughout. They also provide further evidence of the Luftwaffe attacks on 29 May and 1 June being the strongest, as the number of casualties jumped from 505 to 1,507 and more significantly from 1,390 to 2,817 on 1 June. This indicates 1 June was the day with the most Luftwaffe attacks, and perhaps the day with the least RAF presence.

However, Luftwaffe activity may not be the only culprit for this increase in casualties and decrease of those evacuated in the last days of the evacuation. Heroic as the flotilla of civilian vessels were, it should be noted that there were numerous issues with some of them, issues that could have caused some delay to evacuations, despite the entirely heroic light that Dunkirk mythology portrayed them with.

The Isle of Man Steam Packet Co. used 29 of its vessels to rescue troops at Dunkirk. However, some of their vessels were not as active as had been initially planned. The vessel Tynwald transported 7,534 troops in five trips. There were meant to be six journeys, but when it was due to commence its fourth, it refused to sail and did not until the evening of 2 June.³³⁷ In a written enquiry from S.T.O Folkestone on 2 June regarding whether Tynwald would sail for Dunkirk if required, the ships Master, W. Qualbrough replied with a letter;

‘Your letter received. I had a signal from the master of the MALINES last night to say him and the master of the BEN MY CREE had considered it hopeless to proceed to Dunkirk. Our crew have been continually on their feet all the week and especially the deck officers who have had to be on their feet for so long. I myself have had 4 hour rest for the week and am at present physically unfit for another trip like what we have had. If it is absolutely necessary to go I will abide with the masters of the other ships’ decision. P.S. There are two more of the crews going ashore now absolutely nervous wrecks and certified by the naval doctors’³³⁸

³³⁷ TNA: ADM 199/788B - Operation "Dynamo": evacuation of troops from Dunkirk.

³³⁸ Ibid.

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Relief crews were sent to replace the old crew and arrived on the evening of 2 June. The ship then sailed that evening and completed a round trip, which was repeated on the next day without incident.³³⁹

Another of their vessels, the *Manx Maid*, was intended to sail on three separate occasions, but never completed a trip as it suffered an engine breakdown on the evening of 2 June before it could make any trips. It was rendered unusable and other ships were made use of instead.³⁴⁰

The third vessel that had issues was *Ben My Cree*, which transported 406 troops in two trips, although it was meant to complete four. The reasons were similar to that of the crew of *Tynwald*; reluctance to return to Dunkirk because of what the crew witnessed and exhaustion. This meant the vessel was not used in the evacuation effort for much of 2 June as it was meant to until a relief crew commandeered it that evening. However, it was involved in a collision on the way to Dunkirk and did not complete the trip.³⁴¹

The fourth of these was *Manx Man*, which transported 233 troops in three trips, though it was intended to complete five. Prior to its fourth journey on 2 June, the crew refused to sail, for similar reasons to *Tynwald* and *Ben My Cree*. A relief crew was put on board and the vessel started a trip, but failed to reach Dunkirk. On its return, the original captain re-joined with some of the original crew and the ship was then meant to sail at 20:10hrs on 3 June, but the captain reported that the ship was three engineers short at the last minute. It was not considered necessary to wait for the engineers and so the master and crew disembarked with a new crew being provided. Before use could be made of the ship, however, the evacuation terminated.³⁴² It is easy to see why the evacuation was taking a toll on the crews for these vessels as they would have been under constant attack from the Luftwaffe, particularly on 1 June with the onslaught that occurred on this day.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

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These were not the only vessels unable to play a part in the evacuation. Engine breakdowns were common and some were commandeered too late. An example of this is the yacht *Singapore II* which did not make it across the Channel due to engine failure.³⁴³ Furthermore, a dozen fishing vessels from Hastings were ordered to report to Dover to take part in the evacuation, but they never participated. This is likely to be because, by that time, the German armed forces had overrun the town and only boats that could reach the speed of twenty knots were sent over.³⁴⁴

Although the outcome may not have been too different had these vessels been used as intended for the evacuation, it is clear the issues faced had some impact. An indication of this comes from a telegram to the Admiralty on 2 June mentioning that 47,000 troops still needed to be evacuated, serving as the reason why the evacuation, which had been anticipated to end on the night of 1 June, was extended until 4 June.³⁴⁵

A telegram to Admiralty made at 05:30hrs on 31 May mentions ‘clearance still rather low at East Beach, clearance going better in West Beach, clearance from Dunkirk seems to be quite high.’³⁴⁶ This suggests that, for the East Beach at least, these evacuations were not proceeding as rapidly as anticipated. It also indicates that this area was the main target for the Luftwaffe on this day, as the telegram mentions the appearance of several Heinkel aircraft, which were used by the Luftwaffe, and puts in a request for RAF assistance.³⁴⁷ This suggests that the efforts of evacuation vessels in that location, whether naval or civilian, were hampered by enemy aircraft activity.

As the number of troops evacuated on this day was higher than the previous, it appears this problem was rectified. Another telegram to the Admiralty on the same day states ‘every available ship to be required at Dunkirk during the next two hours to evacuate the rest of the army.’³⁴⁸ With a higher number being evacuated to that of the previous day, and with fewer vessels being damaged or sunk by Luftwaffe activity than the previous and following days, it appears this request was successful.

³⁴³ Nigel Sharp, *Dunkirk Little Ships* (London: Amber Publishing, 2015), 56.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴⁵ TNA: WO 106/1613 - Channel ports; evacuation from Dunkirk area.

³⁴⁶ TNA: WO 222/1530 - Dynamo plan.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ TNA: WO 106/1613 - Channel ports; evacuation from Dunkirk area.

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However, issues with the vessels involved in the evacuation persisted as a message to Admiralty on 1 June 1940 mentions '[it is] reported that a number of towing and small boats are returning empty.'³⁴⁹ This further suggests that some of the vessels involved with the evacuation on that day were unable to effectively carry out their duties. Further correspondence from the Dunkirk Military to the War Office, which is likely to have also been from 1 June, although not certain, further suggests this;

'[It is] absolutely imperative that minimum five Hospital Carriers report Dunkirk otherwise several hundred wounded cannot be accommodated or treated. Cases have occurred of carriers arriving off the port and failing to enter. Can this be remedied. Essential to know the time of arrival at least two hours in advance.'³⁵⁰

This indicates that, despite many casualties being evacuated on 1 June as shown in Table 3, there may have been many more that could not be evacuated due to Luftwaffe hampering the actions of vessels. Although it is very likely that the Luftwaffe had some responsibility for this, given their heavy presence and the damage caused by many of their attacks, but is also likely that other factors were also the reason for this. As established, there had been issues with some vessels that were part of the Little Ships flotilla, which prevented some of them from making their planned journeys.

Furthermore, it also appears that there were problems with the Royal Navy and smaller vessels on 27 May, as it was reported there was confusion which resulted in ships heading for Dunkirk being sent back empty and smaller vessels needed to clear the beaches not yet being sent over.³⁵¹ This can provide an explanation for why the 27 May had such a low number of troops evacuated compared to later days. According to a message sent to the War Office at 12:45hrs on 27 May, no evacuation ships had arrived at Dunkirk yet. This would have slowed the process down even further and, given how air attacks had already taken place at 09:30hrs, 10:45hrs and 12:30hrs that morning,³⁵² it would have most likely been an easy target for the Luftwaffe.

³⁴⁹ TNA: WO 106/1613 - Channel ports; evacuation from Dunkirk area.

³⁵⁰ TNA: WO 222/1530 - Dynamo plan.

³⁵¹ Charles More, *The Road to Dunkirk*, 303.

³⁵² TNA: WO 106/1607 - Channel Ports; Defence of Dunkirk.

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The official Naval History, although noting how they were able to play their role in the evacuation, is negative towards aspects of the Navy's involvement. It mentions there were difficulties and confusion caused through the operation because of an ineffective signalling arrangement, both locally between Dunkirk and its beaches and long-distance between Dover and Dunkirk. The equipment that was taken by the signal party, which went to Dunkirk from England on 27 May to set up this system, was not adequate for communication between the beaches and between Dunkirk and the beaches. This problem was partially rectified by the Naval parties using their initiative to improve the inter-communication arrangements. Despite this, it would not be until 30 May that a Naval wireless set that could communicate with England was sent to Dunkirk. Until then, messages were sent either through French radio station in code that was unsuitable or through any Destroyer that was near to the messenger, meaning said messenger would have to force his way along the narrow footway of the pier, which was usually crowded with evacuating soldiers. These insufficient arrangements had made it near impossible to distribute Naval ships to the best advantage points of the beaches or between Dunkirk port and the beaches. According to this same report, the arrival of beaching craft at the beaches became delayed unnecessarily on the 28 and 29 May. This was reportedly because the Admiralty and most of the Naval Authorities who provided the craft accidentally directed them to Dover instead of the Downs, as had been requested by Vice-Admiral Ramsay.³⁵³

Regardless of the reasons why the Luftwaffe had, at times, easy opportunities for attacking the evacuation, they were by no means the only threat to Allied vessels at Dunkirk. Numerous Motor Torpedo Boats (M.T.Bs) were deployed by the German Armed Forces at Dunkirk. On 29 May, they torpedoed and sunk Destroyers *Wakeful* and *Grafton* and on 1 June, trawlers *Stella Dorado* and *Argyllshire* were torpedoed and sunk by M.T.B.s.

There was also the threat from the German Shore Artillery. This danger was present from the start of the evacuation; between 03:00hrs and 15:00hrs, no less than five transports would be shelled and returned to England without making any trips.³⁵⁴ Though it is not clear if these five were damaged, there were five vessels that were

³⁵³ TNA: ADM 234/360 - Evacuation from Dunkirk (Operation Dynamo), 26 May - 4 June 1940.

³⁵⁴ TNA: ADM 116/4504 - Operation "Dynamo": reports and recommendations for awards.

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damaged during the evacuation by shelling or artillery fire. The Personnel Vessel Princess Maud was damaged by enemy gunfire from shore batteries on 30 May, Minesweeper Sandown had its boiler room damaged by shell fire on 1 June. On that same day the personnel vessel, Mona's Isle, was straddled by enemy shore batteries and enemy dive bombers. These would be near misses but would cause significant damage. Hospital carriers, Paris and Worthing, would also be shelled and fired at on 2 June. Paris had its engines put out of action and was later abandoned, while Worthing would only have a small amount of damage done. Also, at the start of the evacuation, one of the evacuation routes came under gunfire from batteries near Calais, which led to this route only being used at night. Until the afternoon of 1 June 1940, another route was targeted by German batteries.³⁵⁵

Also, a threat both at and around Dunkirk were mines that were laid in different areas. Areas where they were laid included roads that led to Dunkirk, one of the evacuation routes and even the entrances to Folkestone and Dover harbours.³⁵⁶ Six vessels are known to have been victims to these mines. On 28 May 1940, trawlers, Thuringia and Thomas Bartlett, were sunk by mines, as was the personnel vessel, Mona's Queen, on 29 May. On 1 June, the Fleet Air Arm (F.A.A) training yacht, Grive, was blown up by a mine after leaving Dunkirk and on 2 June, trawlers, Blackburn and Westella, were sunk by mines. It is likely that some of these mines could have been laid by German U-Boat submarines, which were known to have been present around the area. It is also likely that many of these were laid by the Luftwaffe, as it would be common for the Luftwaffe to lay mines during this time, usually done by means of parachutes, potentially making them responsible for the loss of those vessels sunk or destroyed by mines during that time.

While shore artillery, potential minelaying by U-Boats and M.T.B attacks all possessed their own threat, it is clear the Luftwaffe was responsible for sinking and damaging most vessels at Dunkirk, especially as they were thought to have been minelaying. For completion, the two tables below list all the types of evacuation vessels that were

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

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damaged, sunk and lost at Dunkirk as well as what was responsible for the loss or damage.

	Air Attacks	E-Boats or S/MS	Mines	Shore Guns
Destroyers	5	3	-	1
Gunboats	1	-	-	-
Minesweepers	5	-	-	-
Armed boarding vessels	1	-	-	-
Trawlers	6	2	5	1
Special Service vessels	1	-	-	-
Drifters	2	-	-	1
Yachts	-	-	1	-
Skoots	1	-	-	1
Personnel vessels	6	-	1	-
Hospital carriers	1	-	-	-
Seaplane tender	1	-	-	-
Tugs	2	-	-	-
Cockle Bawley Boat	-	-	1	-
Total	32	5	8	4

Table 4: Ships sunk or lost³⁵⁷

	Air Attacks	E-Boats or S/MS	Mines	Shore Guns
Destroyers	8	1	-	-
Sloops	1	-	-	-
Minesweepers	2	-	-	-
Trawlers	-	-	-	1
Personnel vessels	2	-	-	2

³⁵⁷ ADM 234/360 - Evacuation from Dunkirk (Operation Dynamo), 26 May - 4 June 1940.

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Hospital carriers	2	-	1	-
Total	15	1	1	3

Table 5: Ships damaged and put out of action³⁵⁸

This indicates out of all the German armed forces present at or near Dunkirk, it was the Luftwaffe that posed the most significant threat to the evacuation process at Dunkirk. It could also be argued that the German Ground Forces and Panzer Divisions posed a significant threat, as they pushed the Allied Forces from Belgium and across France before cornering them in northern France, becoming the catalyst for the evacuation. However, due to being given orders to halt near Dunkirk, they never directly attacked the evacuating troops or impeded the evacuation. It was the Luftwaffe who were tasked with disrupting the evacuation and directly attacking Dunkirk, cementing themselves as the true threat to Operation Dynamo.

It is this factor alone that makes the role of the RAF at Dunkirk arguably the most important. The Royal Navy and the Little Ships of Dunkirk were also very important, as it was these boats that were rescuing the troops from the beaches and bringing them back to Britain. However, they had to contend with shore artillery, MTB's and, most significantly, the Luftwaffe. It was the RAF that was tasked with tackling the significant threat that was the Luftwaffe, while the naval and civilian vessels rescued the troops from the beaches. From evidence shown earlier, the RAF was able to make an impact, despite having to fend off an air force that was arguably stronger and would stop at nothing to disrupt the evacuation. They managed to shoot down a significant number of planes on most days, the exceptions being 30 May, when bad weather stopped RAF and Luftwaffe activity, and on 3 and 4 June, most likely because of the evacuation taking place at night on those days. Even on the 29 May and 1 June, when Luftwaffe attacks were the most devastating and when it must have seemed like the RAF was outmatched, they were still able to down a significant number of Luftwaffe craft. They were unable to provide constant cover at times, but when they could do so they were very effective.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

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The RAF's contributions to the evacuation did not just take place over or close to the coasts of Dunkirk and northern France. They also attacked German targets further inland. RAF Coastal Command flew patrols across numerous shipping routes utilised by German armed forces to disrupt the transportation of weapons and ammunition meant for their advance. Coastal Command also aimed to stop interference from German U-Boats and E-Boats deployed to sink the numerous evacuation vessels. On 27 May, RAF 2 Squadron bombed several German motor convoys and rail yards that were bringing supplies for the German armed forces advancing on the stranded BEF troops. German troop concentration points were also bombed during this time, with the German rearguards also being targeted by numerous sorties from Bomber Command to disrupt attempts at supplying front-line units. On May 27 alone, forty Luftwaffe aircraft would be destroyed by the RAF over inland Belgium and France³⁵⁹. This indicates that the Luftwaffe may not have been at full strength at Dunkirk, therefore many of their attacks were not as effective as they could have been.

Furthermore, during the last stages of the evacuation, there is further indication that the RAF was not completely focusing on disrupting Operation Dynamo. Many of their squadrons were being kept in reserve for a major operation to be carried out on 3 June 1940, known as Operation Paula. This operation aimed to destroy the remnants of the French air force and the factories where French army vehicles were manufactured, finishing off the remnants of the air and ground forces, thereby assuring France's defeat.³⁶⁰ This operation saw 28 railway nexuses and marshalling yards being attacked and damaged, as well as numerous French airfields. Although the damage ended up being less severe than initially intended, with the railyards and nexuses being back in use within 24 hours and 16 of the targeted airfields being seriously damaged with slight damage to 15 targeted manufacturing plants, it was still a massive operation. Some 1,100 Luftwaffe aircraft were used for the operation, much of which was assembled before 3 June.³⁶¹ This implies there were fewer Luftwaffe craft present at Dunkirk for the last two days of the evacuation. Effective as the RAF was in many of

³⁵⁹ Robert Jackson, *Dunkirk: The British Evacuation*, 191.

³⁶⁰ Dilip Sarkar, *Battle of Britain 1940: The Finest Hour's Human Cost* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military, 2020), 278.

³⁶¹ Codenames: Operation Paula - <https://codenames.info/operation/paula-i/>.

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their attacks at Dunkirk, they could likely have done even more damage had Operation Paula not been formulated.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the German Panzer Divisions that had been advancing towards the Dunkirk beaches had been ordered to halt their attack due to the terrain being unsuitable for the tanks, and the High Command had been anxious to lose too much artillery.³⁶² Had this temporary order to halt not been given and they had continued to advance on the BEF troops, it is likely, fewer soldiers could have been evacuated from the beaches, with or without the RAF being at full strength.

It is also worth noting that the Luftwaffe also had other targets during the time of the evacuation, especially as the final phases of the Siege of Belgium took place during the start of the evacuation. On 28 May 1940, particular focus was made by the Luftwaffe on attacking the Belgian towns of Ostend and Nieuport, as they were the only places where the Belgian Army still attempted to hold out against the advancing German forces.³⁶³ However, they were by now becoming resistance-exhausted after being overwhelmed by German armed forces, who had an easy time quashing the remaining resistance. Belgium eventually surrendered on 28 May and was now occupied by Germany. Although there was a strong Luftwaffe presence at Dunkirk on this day and on 27 May, it is again likely they were not necessarily at their optimum strength.

Both the Panzers' halt and the preparations for Operation Paula unintentionally and arguably played an important role in allowing many BEF troops to be rescued from the beaches, but it can still be argued that the RAF still played a more crucial role. With more Luftwaffe aircraft being shot down than RAF aircraft for nearly every day of the evacuation, it is clear the RAF still made an impact and could have very well made a difference to the evacuation of BEF troops. Pilot Officer Tony Bartlett of RAF 92 Squadron has held this belief: 'Frankly if it hadn't been for the RAF, the troops would never have got off. Because the German Air Force quit the beaches. We turned them back. I'm damned sure the Fighter Command had a hell of a lot to do with it.'³⁶⁴ The Royal Navy had indeed, as already mentioned, played a very crucial role at Dunkirk as

³⁶² Hans Adolf-Jacobsob, *Dunkirk: German Operations in France 1940* (Casemate Publishing, 2019), 103.

³⁶³ Robert Jackson, *The British Invasion: 1940*, 94.

³⁶⁴ Joshua Levine, *Forgotten Voices of Dunkirk and the Battle of France* (London: Ebury Press, 2010), 233.

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they rescued a great majority of the stranded British troops from the beaches and port of Dunkirk, and dealt some damage of their own to the Luftwaffe.

From 27 May to 1 June 1940, the total daily number of evacuations continued to climb, quadrupling in the space of just three days. Even on days when the Luftwaffe would have likely caused significant disruption, the numbers are still high. With their achievements at Dunkirk and inland France in protecting the evacuation, it appears certain that the RAF had some responsibility for this continuous rise in numbers.

Further Allied Evacuations and Activity in France

Operation Dynamo officially ended on 4 June, although the evacuation of Allied troops from France did not end there. Approximately 200,000 British and Commonwealth troops were stranded in France. Two operations were devised to rescue them; Operation Cycle and Operation Aerial, with the RAF being intended to play a crucial role in both. However, losses from the Battle of France and Operation Dynamo were taking their toll. This is indicated by a message to the Air Ministry from the Commander in Chief of RAF Coastal Command. This message stated every effort would be made by Command to give fighter protection; however, there was only one Blenheim Squadron in the South. Because of aircraft casualties in Operation Dynamo, it had been reduced to nine aircraft.³⁶⁵ It is likely that these shortages could have played a part in the outcome of Operation Cycle: less troops being evacuated than anticipated because of evacuation fleets being ambushed by German forces, ending the evacuation earlier than expected.

The RAF would have more success at Operation Aerial, which is particularly evident from the low casualty figures of the evacuation. Even if it was a devastating loss, with approximately 3,500 lives being lost, only one Navy vessel was lost: the HMT *Lancastria*. Furthermore, although the first evacuation was disrupted to the point where it ended prematurely, many troops were still able to be rescued. While it is likely that the implied lack of aircraft could have made them less effective at times, much of this success can be attributed to the RAF's actions, especially for Operation Aerial where the RAF was once again the main threat. Like Operation Dynamo before, it appears

³⁶⁵ TNA: AIR 15/203 - Evacuation of Dunkirk: Air support.

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almost certain that had the RAF been unable to play a part, fewer troops would have been evacuated and much more losses would have been suffered by the Royal Navy.

These two evacuations were by no means the only activity carried out by the RAF in France after Operation Dynamo. The Battle of France was ongoing, with the RAF continuing to play a role. From 5 June to 14 June, the AASF continued to be active in northern France, focusing on attacking troop concentrations and movements as well as bombing Somme and Seine River crossings, as a means of intervening with the rest of the battle. Bridges were successfully attacked at Les Andelys, Vernon and Verzillion, with only slight casualties. They also carried out some partially successful reconnaissance missions on the 13 and 14 June south of the river Seine, instructed to attack any suitable targets. The Seine and Somme crossings were also attacked at night, with considerable effort being expended against the French and Belgian aerodromes requisitioned by Germany and against troop concentrations in Les Andelys and St Gobain. Between 8 June and 14 June, 53 fighter sorties would encounter 185 enemy aircraft, taking a toll of 25 for the loss of 7.³⁶⁶

Bomber Command also continued to be active over France, supporting ground troops in the Battle of France. No. 2 Group were active from 5 June to 14 June 1940 on the Seine and Somme fronts, attacking River crossings, enemy communications, troops and vehicles, having much success in the process. Their losses were heavier than the AASF, but still on a small scale than in the early stages of the Battle of France. Out of the 442 sorties active during this phase, only 24 reportedly failed to return and four crashed or were forced to land, with their crews being saved. Night bombers were also employed during this period, targeting troop concentrations, river crossings, railheads and the Ruhr marshalling yards.³⁶⁷

Like with Operation Dynamo, fighter operations continued during this phase. As well as providing protection for Operations Cycle and Aerial, these operations consisted of covering the day bombing activities for the AASF and No. 2 Group and patrolling to counter Luftwaffe dive-bombing in the Seine area.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁶ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Trafford's Papers.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

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During the very last stages of the Battle of France, 15 to 18 June 1940, the only Bomber operations carried out were attacking enemy concentrations and columns in the Evreux District on 15 June. On the night of the 16 and 17 June, Bomber Command also carried out attacks on Seine crossings at Port De L'Arche, Venon and Les Andelys. Both operations produced good results. Fighter operations at the time, as already mentioned, mainly focused on overseeing Operations Aerial and Cycle. Although these actions carried out by the RAF would amount to very little in the long run, as the Battle of France still ended with the surrender of France to Germany, the RAF clearly continued to have much success in France after Dunkirk. Though they could not prevent the fall of France to Nazi Germany, and in turn mainland Europe now being under Nazi occupation, it is likely they were at least able to delay the invasion to some extent. Operations Cycle and Aerial, to some extent, had success, most notably how they were able to evacuate more British troops. The RAF had also had successes against the German armed forces in France during the final stages of the Battle. Some of their successful actions against German forces would have likely slowed some of them down in their pursuit of remaining British forces, in turn allowing many of them to be evacuated safely. It seems likely, therefore, that the RAF was once again the main reason why British troops in France were able to be rescued.

Conclusion

Overall, the RAF was at a disadvantage before, during and after the Dunkirk evacuation. During the Battle of France, before Operation Dynamo commenced, many aircraft were lost to the Luftwaffe and the German ground forces. This meant the RAF had limited resources right from the start of the evacuation, not helped by concerns over the need to conserve aircraft for later attacks. Even the operations of the RAF squadrons active at Dunkirk were often hampered, due to the limited fuel capacity of the aircraft that were available, and many pilots being inexperienced in air combat. When they were in the air, smoke from burning wrecks and cloud cover over beaches made visibility difficult for the RAF squadrons. Even though the RAF was not operating at optimum strength, still focusing on inland France and Belgium during the early days of the evacuation. They were nonetheless stronger in terms of resources and formations, with more experienced pilots.

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This resulted in the RAF being the less visible component of the Dunkirk evacuation. The Royal Navy and the flotilla of civilian vessels managed to maintain a constant presence throughout, rescuing the Allied troops from the beaches at Dunkirk, with the Little Ships of Dunkirk (as they would later be known) becoming the most iconic aspect of the evacuation. The RAF, on the other hand, were not able to maintain the same degree of presence that civilian vessels and the Royal Navy had. As indicated earlier, by the reduction of flying hours and patrols (see Table 1), even when the RAF was present and were able to perform their task of defence more easily, many of the dogfights took place away from the beaches and the smoke that often billowed into the air would make it hard for those on the beaches to see them. Their apparent lack of appearance resulted in many criticisms and even downright hostility from troops being evacuated, with even official documents from the time being very critical of the RAF's performance at Dunkirk. Furthermore, the 'narrative' formed by the myth of 1940 focused on the BEF troops and the Little Ships of Dunkirk, with the RAF being omitted. The fact that the BEF troops and the little ships were constantly at the scene of the evacuation, with the RAF not always being present, and even when they were they were not always visible, helped to make them the core elements. Also making them core elements was how both BEF and civilians struggling together fit the pre-existing image of 'standing alone against an unbeatable enemy'.

However, evidence gathered within this chapter clarifies why such criticism would have come about in the first place by identifying periods of time when the evacuation process was left open for attack from the air. These periods became opportunities that were taken by the Luftwaffe, resulting in many vessels being damaged or even sunk. The official Naval history of Operational Dynamo appears to, overall, view the actions of the RAF at Dunkirk in a mainly positive light, although it does mention there was a poor system of communication in place which made it difficult for cooperation between both the Navy and RAF. However, it does take into account the valiant efforts of the RAF, noting how 'formations of single squadron strength or less [likely around 12] would boldly attack German groups of forty or fifty machines, usually with success out of all proportion to odds against them'.³⁶⁹ While the document notes how ships took the brunt of the Luftwaffe attacks and 'how galling it was for the troops to be

³⁶⁹ ADM 234/360 - Evacuation from Dunkirk (Operation Dynamo), 26 May - 4 June 1940.

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bombed and machine-gunned with little or no opportunity to defend themselves',³⁷⁰ it adds that these attacks were 'never of such severity as to jeopardise the entire operation, as did losses of ships.'³⁷¹

Despite the fact there were obstacles stacked against the RAF that often interfered with their progress, it is arguable that they played the most crucial role in the evacuation. Had they not been able to provide the level of defence that they had, there is no doubt that the attacks carried out by the Luftwaffe would have been even more devastating. Even on days where it would have seemed the Luftwaffe outnumbered them, the RAF was still able to take down a large number of enemy aircraft both around the Dunkirk coast and inland France. Although the Luftwaffe proved to be relentless in their assaults on the beaches, the regular defence provided by the RAF meant that there were fewer assaults than there could have been. While the Navy and the Little Ships were undeniably integral to the evacuation, it was the RAF that was providing their protection, in turn allowing them to carry out the rescue of troops. Even if the German Forces had got the Allies on the run and been responsible for their defeat, the Allies had still managed to make an impact against their opponent. Hans-Adolf Jacobsen makes this interesting point; 'the Germans certainly received a nasty shock and did not feel that they were enjoying unchallenged control of the skies.'³⁷²

Despite the success of Operation Dynamo and those of the RAF before, during and after, there was no changing the fact that mainland Europe was now under German control and would pose a threat to Britain, a threat that would become realised in the Battle of Britain. Although France was not completely occupied until 1942 as the established of the Vichy government allowed France to be under Germany's control without the need for full occupation, Germany had still succeeded in its invasion of France. However, rapid as the invasion of France was, this chapter has established that the RAF had some successes before and after the evacuation. It is likely that these successful attacks launched against the German Armed Forces may have slowed down parts of the invasion and given the BEF more time to retreat to the coast of northern France. This in turn would allow for greater numbers to be evacuated. The RAF

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Dunkirk: German Operations in France*, 208.

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attacking inland German Army convoys during Operation Dynamo would have prevented the advancing armed forces from getting reinforcements, be they troops or supplies. The RAF's activity during the last stages of the Battle of France, including Operations Aerial and Cycle, also would have hampered components of the German armed forces. This could have slowed parts of the invasion further, allowing more BEF troops to be rescued and returned to Britain during these operations.

The triumph of Operation Dynamo, if any, was how it succeeded in rescuing great numbers. It was initially anticipated that a maximum of only 20,000 to 30,000 would be rescued from Dunkirk. Instead, the number of troops that were rescued was approximately 338,000. The first two days of the evacuation alone were able to exceed these expectations. As has been stated previously, Dunkirk was certainly not a victory, the evacuation had only become necessary because of the BEF's defeat in France and Belgium. However, the evacuation did succeed in rescuing many BEF troops and in this regard, it can be seen as a triumph. Dunkirk has been described as a 'miracle of deliverance' and mythologised as such. While not a fitting description, to the author's mind, as Operation Dynamo was the product of a catastrophic defeat, it is easy to see where this name could have come from, given how more troops than anticipated were rescued; a remarkable achievement given the dire circumstances and the relatively short time there was to plan such an operation. Several factors were at play to make this success a reality: the Royal Navy, the much-mythologised little ships, the RAF, some of the BEF and Allied counterattacks against the German forces to a certain extent and even the caution of the German Armed Forces in their approach to the beaches. Of all these contributing factors, it was the RAF that was the most crucial, as they were tasked with countering the Luftwaffe who, given the heavy toll extracted during the events of Operation Dynamo and their partial success in slowing down the evacuation, were the most significant threat. Although mythology has favoured the Little Ships of Dunkirk and the resilience of the troops rescued from the beaches, down to their uniqueness and pre-existing mythology, this does not change the fact that the RAF had the most important role at Dunkirk. Therefore, it is clear the RAF was vital for Operation Dynamo being a successful mission.

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Chapter 4: RAF after Dunkirk – Battle of Britain

Introduction

Despite the valiant efforts of the RAF during Operation Dynamo and the evacuation more than achieving what it had set out to do, it was not enough to change the fact that the German invasion of north-west Europe was a colossal disaster for the Allies, a fact that the myth of Dunkirk being a ‘triumphant victory’ had downplayed. Luxembourg, Holland, Belgium and France all fell to Germany in quick succession and were now under German control. Although their mission to defend north-west Europe ended in disaster, much of the BEF was successfully evacuated, allowing Britain to maintain a strong and sizable Army. However, the conflict was far from over. This chapter will explore how Germany’s ambitions to conquer Europe continued through the Battle of Britain from July to October 1940, and the role that the RAF played during this period. Like with Dunkirk, this chapter will assess how crucial their role was to this battle and if decisions made before and during Dunkirk contributed to any success the RAF may have had. What is also to be explored is how the Battle of Britain has also been mythologised and how the RAF are at the core of the Battle of Britain myth.

Prelude to the Battle

With Denmark and Norway invaded in the Spring of 1940 and with France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg gained in a short period of time, it was not long before Germany set its sights on invading Britain. Indeed, potential attacks against Britain were already being anticipated, as made evident by Winston Churchill’s speech to the public on 18 June 1940;

‘What General Weygand [of the French Armed Forces] has called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the

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war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands'³⁷³

As correctly predicted here, plans for an invasion of Britain were already being drawn up, with Hitler determined to take advantage of the British Army's defeat in the Battle of France. These attacks began on 1 July 1940, with Germany invading the Channel Islands, but the Battle of Britain truly began ten days later. On this day, they began attacking British supply convoys in the English Channel. Attacks like these had already occurred in the days following the invasion of the Channel Islands, but the increased intensity from 12 July marked the start of a new phase in the war. On 16 July 1940, Hitler ordered the German Army and Navy to prepare for a potential landing invasion of Britain, codenamed Operation Sea Lion. The plan was to send a large invasion fleet from the ports of Calais and Rotterdam across the Channel to several beaches on the South Coast of England (see fig. 1 in Appendix). From there, once the beachheads were secured, the ground forces would advance across England, with airborne troops also being dropped much further inland to attack Britain's defences within.

However, before such an invasion could commence, the German forces believed it was crucial to obtain air superiority over the English Channel and the South of England. Hitler instructed the head of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Goering, to have the RAF reduced to such an extent that it would no longer be an effective opposition. Gaining control of the skies over the south coast was regarded as a priority because of Britain's Navy, which was seen as the most powerful Navy in the world at the time. Germany's navy was comparatively weaker from previous conflicts in the war, namely the invasion of Norway in the Spring of 1940. Furthermore, as most troops and war machines would be carried over across the sea, they also believed air superiority on the south coast was needed so that they could protect the passage and landings of their troops and materials.³⁷⁴ It is likely that the RAF's actions at Dunkirk were also a reason why targeting the RAF was regarded as a priority, as a result of dealing much damage to the Luftwaffe, making themselves a credible threat for the German forces.

³⁷³ Ibid, 153.

³⁷⁴ TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch – Despatch by Lord Hugh Dowding, August 1941.

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Before any attack would commence, on 19 July 1940, Hitler made a speech in Berlin, offering conditional peace to the British Government. The condition was that Britain would keep its empire and be spared from invasions if its leaders accepted German dominance in Europe. However, the British Government chose to turn down this offer and continue their fight against Nazi Germany. It was from this point that the Battle of Britain would intensify.

As previously indicated, prior to Dunkirk, Lord Hugh Dowding had made the controversial decision to stop sending RAF aircraft over to France, despite pleas from the French Government. A despatch written by Dowding indicates he had concerns about the need to conserve the RAF's fleet since the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. Prior to the Dunkirk evacuations, his concerns started taking shape as he wrote in his despatch how he saw '[his] resources slipping away like sand in an hour-glass'³⁷⁵ as 'the pressure for more and more assistance to France was relentless and inexorable'.³⁷⁶ It is clear to see how he felt his forces were being depleted as he writes how numerous squadrons were sent over in such a short time;

'At the beginning of April 1940, there were 6 Fighter Squadrons in France... then four more complete squadrons were sent when the fighting began... then on the 13th May, 32 pilots and aircraft were sent – the equivalent of two squadrons... almost immediately afterwards 8 Half-Squadrons were sent'³⁷⁷

As previously mentioned, the RAF was dealt a significant blow at the Battle of France, which resulted in the loss of many aircraft. It is unclear how many aircraft from these squadrons returned, if any, but Dowding expresses concern about the equivalent of sixteen squadrons being sent over to France in his despatch. Adding to this, he also notes how it was assumed the enemy would be able to rebuild its damaged forces but, in his words, he 'had neither the time nor the personnel available for purposes of reconstruction, and the remaining half-squadrons had to be amalgamated into Composite Units with a resulting disorganisation and loss of efficiency.'³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

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Dowding expressed his qualms clearly in a letter to Fighter Command Headquarters on 16 May 1940. He starts by mentioning ‘I hope and believe that our Armies may yet be victorious in France and Belgium, but we have to face the possibility that they may be defeated’.³⁷⁹ This indicates how the situation regarding the BEF in France was being perceived at the time, it was still believed it was possible for the BEF to turn the situation around and end up victorious. This alone highlights how serious Dowding’s concerns were; there was no certainty yet of the defeat the BEF would suffer at the hands of Germany. Therefore, there may not have been a need, at the time, for a sizeable number of aircraft and squadrons to be sent over to France. Yet, for Dowding, doubts were forming about Britain being left with an insufficient fleet of RAF craft.

Dowding then adds ‘in this case I presume that there is no-one who will deny that England should fight on, even though the remainder of the Continent of Europe is dominated by the Germans,’³⁸⁰ indicating that, for Dowding at least, the loss of France and Belgium was starting to become a possibility. He then talks about the number of aircraft required to maintain a stable RAF fleet;

‘For this purpose it is necessary to retain some minimum fighter strength in this country... I would remind the Air Council that the last estimate which they made as to the force necessary to defend this country was 52 Squadrons... strength has now been reduced to the equivalent of 36 Squadrons... It will, of course, be remembered that the estimate of 52 Squadrons was based on the assumption that the attack would come from the eastwards except in so far as the defences might be outflanked in flight. We have now to face the possibility that attacks may come from Spain or even from the North coast of France. The result is that our line is very much extended at the same time as our resources are reduced.’³⁸¹

Furthermore, in correspondence between himself and the Air Ministry, Dowding mentions ‘from 8.5.40 to 18.5.40 about 250 Hurricanes were expended by ten squadrons in France, and, if that rate of loss (25 per diem) had been maintained, all Hurricanes in this

³⁷⁹ TNA: AIR 2/7068 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Registered Files – correspondence between Dowding and Air Ministry.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

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country and France would have been expended early in June.’³⁸² This means that the RAF would still be at a disadvantage in terms of numbers, giving a further indication of how disastrous the Battle could have been had more aircraft been sent to France. This is made more evident by an interesting statement Dowding made in further correspondence;

‘I believe that, if an adequate fighter force is kept in this country, if the fleet remains in being, if Home Forces are suitably organised to resist invasion, we should be able to carry on the war single handed for some time, if not indefinitely. But, if the Home Defence Force is drained away in desperate attempts to remedy the situation in France, defeat in France will involve the final, complete and irremediable defeat of this country’³⁸³

This shows how vital the Battle of France became for the Battle of Britain. Had the RAF been defeated in France, the Battle of Britain would have become a defeat. The fortunes of the Battle of Britain could have been very different had decisions regarding the RAF’s actions in May 1940 not been made. This will be examined in this chapter.

A summarised order of Battle from Fighter Command on 20 May 1940 gives further credence to Dowding’s concerns:

Type of Aircraft	Number of Operational Squadrons	Total Squadrons	I.E. per Squadron	Total I.E.	Total aircraft available for operations
Spitfires	19	19	16	304	247
Hurricanes	11	14	-	176	99
Blenheims	6	6	-	96	69
Defiants	1	2	-	16	10
Total	37	41	-	592	425

Table 1: Summarised order of Battle – Fighter Command (Air Ministry - 20.5.40)³⁸⁴

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch – Despatch by Lord Hugh Dowding, August 1941.

³⁸⁴ TNA: AIR 2/7068 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Registered Files – correspondence between Dowding and Air Ministry.

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The above table indicates enough squadrons and aircraft being available at the time. However, what it can also indicate is how precarious the situation could have been had Dowding not had qualms about the RAF having enough aircraft. The RAF was overwhelmed by the Luftwaffe during the Battle of France and still experienced challenges during Operation Dynamo. More aircraft and crews would be lost after this Order of Battle was drawn up, which would have reduced the number of available squadrons and aircraft. Had Dowding not expressed his reservations and had more aircraft been sent over, the numbers would most likely have been drastically reduced, leading to insufficient numbers for Operation Dynamo and the Battle of Britain. It also appears that when the news of the Blitzkrieg's launch was announced, the RAF intended to use all their available resources to counter the advancing German forces and were quick to do so. As indicated from an Operations Record Book for RAF 222 Squadron, personnel were reportedly being recalled from leave on 10 May 1940 so they could assist in the defence of mainland Europe.³⁸⁵ With the RAF clearly intending to operate at its maximum strength, this clearly was, for Dowding, a cause for concern.

Dowding would not be the only person to have such concerns about the need to conserve the RAF's fleet. Group Captain S.C. Trafford would also start to have concerns later in the evacuation. In a letter regarding the employment of additional British Fighter Squadrons in France, from 1 June 1940, he expresses such concerns. He acknowledges the successes of the RAF during this period but claims this was down to RAF craft operating from fully equipped home bases and within their operational radius. He also praises the superiority the RAF fighters had gained over the Luftwaffe. This, however, was a reason for his concern, as he notes this superiority 'must, if it could be continued, break his [the enemy's] air force within a period of not many weeks.'³⁸⁶

Clearly, he was determined to make sure the RAF's successful performance continued and had doubts that it could continue for long. He gives an indication of this by mentioning that 'it is equally necessary to ease the pressure on France and to forestall increasing and impossible demands for the misuse of our fighters in local defence of what may, unfortunately, prove to be a rapid succession of inadequately defended land

³⁸⁵ TNA: AIR 27/1371/1 - Summary of Events: Squadron Number 222.

³⁸⁶ TNA: AIR 35/340 - Battle of France: Group Captain Trafford's Papers.

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defences.’³⁸⁷ This suggests he had concerns that the RAF’s supply of aircraft could become diminished if large amounts continued to be used to defend France, which in turn could lead to not many being left to defend Britain. Strafford, towards the end of his letter, makes an interesting point regarding how imperative conservation of aircraft was;

‘French High Command must be made to see that their salvation and ours now lies in the proper handling of the British Air Force. This proper handling, it is suggested, entails full and consistent employment of our heavy bombers, consistently and economically against carefully selected vital targets inside Germany... his [Germany’s] air force will thus for the first time be brought up against a modern and fully organised air defence system with results in our favour of which there can be little doubt.’³⁸⁸

In a similar vein to Dowding, Strafford clearly believed that a victory for Britain against German attacks could only be achieved if Britain had a strong air force to counter them. As Germany believed that having air superiority would make an attack against Britain easy, it is clear to see why Strafford believed this. As this Chapter will explain, Strafford’s beliefs on this matter would indeed prove to be valid.

Even with limited aircraft being despatched to France during May 1940, the RAF did start to feel the pinch from losing aircraft and crews. During the latter months of the Battle of Britain, the RAF was becoming badly affected as they were beginning to lose pilots faster than they could be replaced, as Pilot Alan Deere of RAF 54 Squadron explains:

‘We were desperately short of pilots... they came straight to a squadron from their training establishments. Some of them did have a few hours on the Hurricanes... but none on the Spitfire. For example, we got two young New Zealanders into my flight [who had been] trained on some very outdated aircraft... we were pretty busy and so we gave them what was known as a cockpit check. Then they’d go off for one solo flight and circuit, and then they were into battle. The answer if of course that they didn’t last.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

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Those two lasted two trips and they both finished up in Dover Hospital, strangely enough. One was pulled out of the channel. One landed by parachute.³⁸⁹

This shortage had a knock-on effect on the pilots that were available for service. RAF Pilot Denys Gilliam explicates how RAF pilots were often stretched to their limit:

‘One was called about four in the morning... then you generally scrambled about seven or eight o’clock for the first raid. And then you came back, refuelled and rearmed, and they brought sandwiches down to one at the dispersal. And then you... had another battle, and probably a third in the afternoon or evening. And then towards dusk you would ease up and you were on readiness until just after dark. At the end of our tour when there were only three or four of us they were even asking us to night fly which was very hard because we really weren’t getting enough sleep.’³⁹⁰

While these shortages primarily appear to be down to aircraft and pilot losses during the conflicts of the Battle of Britain, it is also likely that the events of the Battle of France and Dunkirk were responsible, given that the RAF, despite being successful with their mission at Dunkirk, took a beating at both events. However, this situation could have been even worse if the RAF had not restricted the numbers of aircraft to send over to France. As more aircraft would have most likely been lost, because of the intensity of the Luftwaffe’s attacks, the shortage of available crews would have been greater and have been an issue for the duration of the Battle of Britain as a whole. It is even possible that this situation might not have even been fully rectified, as the RAF was evidently stretched with numbers of available crews, implied by Alan Deere and Denys Gilliam’s accounts.

The Battle of Britain

Prior to the battle, Britain had been faced with a shortage of aluminium, a material that was necessary for constructing the Spitfire aircraft. A plea was made by Lord Beaverbrook to turn in available aluminium-based items over to the Ministry of Aircraft Production, a campaign that would become known as the ‘Spitfire Fund’. This

³⁸⁹ IWM: SR 1047 – Oral History: Alan Deere (RAF 54 Squadron).

³⁹⁰ IWM: SR 10049 – Oral History: Denys Gilliam (RAF 616 Squadron).

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proved to be successful with many people donating unwanted cooking utensils and other items. Despite the ‘Spitfire Fund’ appearing to have been a successful campaign, with the production of Hurricanes still being steady, there had still been a slump in Spitfire production and a shortage of aircraft for quite some time.³⁹¹ The table below demonstrates how this slump in Spitfire production continued throughout the Battle, especially compared to Hurricane Production:

Dates	Spitfires	Hurricanes
1 – June 1940	22	87
8 – 14 June 1940	22	79
15 – 21 June 1940	25	67
22 – 28 June 1940	21	75
2 June – 5 July 1940	26	68
6 – 12 July 1940	32	65
13 – 19 July 1940	30	57
20 – 26 July 1940	41	67
27 July – 2 August 1940	37	65
3 – 9 August 1940	41	58
10 – 16 August 1940	37	54
17 – 23 August 1940	31	43
24 – 30 August 1940	44	64
31 August – 6 September 1940	37	54
7 – 13 September 1940	36	54
14 – 20 September 1940	38	56

³⁹¹ Dilip Sakar, *How the Spitfire won the Battle of Britain* (Cheltenham: Amberley Publishing, 2010), 137.

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21 – 27 September 1940	40	57
28 September – 4 October 1940	34	58
5 – 11 October 1940	32	60
12 – 18 October 1940	31	55
19 – 25 October 1940	25	55
26 October – 1 November 1940	42	69
Total	724	1,367

Table 2: Production of Hurricanes and Spitfires, July – November 1940³⁹²

To complete the picture, the tables below show the weekly and monthly output of RAF aircraft before and during the Battle of Britain.

Date	Operational	Non-Operational	Total
April 6 1940	144	62	226
April 13 1940	155	86	241
April 20 1940	161	67	228
April 27 1940	141	100	241
May 4 1940	159	91	250
May 11 1940	162	67	249
May 16 1940	149	91	240
May 25 1940	202	102	304
June 1 1940	282	102	384
June 6 1940	285	62	347
June 15 1940	258	95	353
June 22 1940	261	146	407
June 29 1940	292	105	397

³⁹² TNA: AIR 22/293 – C.S.B Statistics Vol. 1: aircraft production, imports and exports: Weekly output of fighters.

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July 6 1940	281	95	376
July 13 1940	230	101	331
July 20 1940	270	134	404
July 27 1940	269	124	393
August 3 1940	262	132	394
August 10 1940	230	104	334
August 17 1940	222	96	318
August 24 1940	265	127	392
August 31 1940	243	122	365
September 7 1940	203	106	309
September 14 1940	221	104	325
September 21 1940	211	105	316
September 28 1940	214	107	321
October 5 1940	210	99	309
October 12 1940	201	109	310
October 19 1940	202	118	320
October 26 1940	241	120	361
November 2 1940	208	118	326

Table 3: Weekly output of Aircraft, April – November 1940³⁹³

Date	Operational		Non-operational		Total	
	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual	Planned	Actual
September 1939	558	568	155	213	713	781
October 1939	557	546	189	202	746	748
November 1939	571	580	205	215	776	795
December 1939	533	473	189	127	722	600
January 1940	577	548	248	254	825	802

³⁹³ AIR 20/4174 - Battle of Britain: Daily Statistics of operational aircraft and crew in Fighter Command.

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February 1940	581	510	256	209	837	719
March 1940	632	614	296	246	928	660
April 1940	763	688	430	393	1,193	1,081
May 1940	794	843	419	436	1,213	1,279
June 1940	1,164	1,163	448	428	1,612	1,591
July 1940	1,061	1,110	541	555	1,602	1,665
August 1940	1,143	1,087	563	514	1,706	1,601
September 1940	1,195	908	457	433	1,692	1,341
October 1940	1,218	917	530	502	1,748	1,419

Table 4: Monthly output of aircraft, September 1939 – October 1940³⁹⁴

Even if they still had enough, the RAF still had to combat a powerful opponent; the Luftwaffe, who were still as relentless as they had been at the Battle of France and the Dunkirk evacuations. In terms of aircraft numbers, the Luftwaffe was superior to the RAF throughout the Battle of Britain. The exact numbers seem unclear, but it appears that the RAF would have 749 fighter aircraft available in the Battle, compared to approx. 2,550 Luftwaffe aircraft.³⁹⁵ However, an Air Ministry report from August 1941 indicates there were 4,200 total Luftwaffe aircraft active (1,400 fighters and 2,800 long-range bombers, bomber reconnaissance and dive-bomber aircraft)³⁹⁶, although the latter could be an overestimation at the time. The same report also indicates, of the 55 RAF Squadrons that were active, only 25 squadrons could fulfil the quota of having 12 operational pilots available, while the other 27 squadrons would be down approximately five or six pilots each, indicating the RAF did not always operate at optimum strength.³⁹⁷ The tables below show the fighter aircraft that were available for service during different periods of the Battle of Britain:

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Historic UK – Air Clubs of World War Two: <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Air-Clubs-World-War-Two/>.

³⁹⁶ TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch – Report on experience of Fighter Operations in this Defensive.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

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	Squadrons	Serviceable a/c	Operational (serviceable with crews)
Hurricanes	27	582	334
Spitfires	19	320	226
Gladiators	-	-	-
Defiants	2	39	24
Blenheims	6	92	62
Total	54	1033	656

Table 5: Fighter Command: operational Aircraft and Crews – 10 July 1940³⁹⁸

	Squadrons	Serviceable a/c	Operational (serviceable with crews)
Hurricanes	28.5	645	370
Spitfires	19	335	257
Gladiators	0.5	7	7
Defiants	2	30	20
Blenheims	6	83	66
Total	56	1100	720

Table 6: Fighter Command: operational Aircraft and Crews – 8 August 1940³⁹⁹

	Squadrons	Serviceable a/c	Operational (serviceable with crews)
Hurricanes	34	561	399
Spitfires	19	294	227
Gladiators	0.5	9	8
Defiants	2	39	10

³⁹⁸ TNA: AIR 20/4174 - Battle of Britain: Daily Statistics of operational aircraft and crew in Fighter Command.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

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Blenheims	6	61	40
Total	61.5	964	720

Table 7: Fighter Command: operational Aircraft and Crews – 31 October 1940⁴⁰⁰

On July 10 1940, 120 German bombers and fighters struck British shipping convoys in the English Channel while 70 more bombers attacked dockyard installations in South Wales.⁴⁰¹ Attacks like these would continue for some time, but on August 8 1940, the Luftwaffe intensified their raids against ports in an attempt to draw out the RAF. Britain's radar defence system and RAF fighter airfields also came under attack.⁴⁰² Their attacks against Britain also intensified during this time. As with Dunkirk, the RAF was relentless in their attacks. However, this time it would be much more severe given that these were on a much greater scale than the beaches of Dunkirk.

12 August 1940 saw Goering changed his focus to attacking airfields and radar bases. Radar stations at Dunkirk, Dover, Pevensey, Rye and Ventnor on the Isle of Wight were attacked, with RAF airfields at Lympne, Hawkinge and Manston also being bombed.⁴⁰³ Folkstone and Dover would also be shelled, while oil bombs were dropped on Ramsgate, with Portsmouth and Kent also being bombed. Further attacks over numerous towns and villages in Britain would be carried out overnight.⁴⁰⁴

15 August 1940 saw heavy attacks mounted on numerous areas of England, aiming to overwhelm the RAF's defence of Britain. Hawkinge and Lympne airfield saw further attacks, which the RAF responded fiercely to. The second of these attacks was in the North-East of England, believing they would meet little resistance because of needing to defend against Luftwaffe attacks in the South-East.⁴⁰⁵ The third, carried out in the afternoon, targeted Martlesham Heath airfield and later attacked the airfields of Eastchurch and Rochester and the radar stations at Dover, Rye, Bawdsey and

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Patrick Bishop, *Battle of Britain: A Day-by-Day Chronicle*, 10 July – 31 October 1940 (London: Quercus Publishing Ltd, 2009), 52.

⁴⁰² Greg Baughen, *RAF in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain* (Oxford: Fonthill Media Ltd, 2016), 255.

⁴⁰³ John Lake, *The Battle of Britain* (Steyning, Bookmark Ltd, 2000), 90-91.

⁴⁰⁴ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin: The Battle of Britain and the Rise of Air Power* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd), 304.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 313.

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Foreness.⁴⁰⁶ In the evening, large numbers of Luftwaffe aircraft attacked Worthy Down, Portland and Middle Wallop airfields in the south-west of England, causing significant damage. There had also been the intention to attack Kenley and Biggin Hill aerodromes but, due to a miscalculation, Croydon and West Mailing airfields were attacked instead, causing extensive damage to both airfields.⁴⁰⁷

These two days alone illustrate just how widespread Luftwaffe bombardments were in the space of a day. Bombardments such as these would continue for the remainder of August, being just as widespread. These mainly focused on airfields in southern and south-east England, with other areas of the country also being attacked; these included South Wales and various towns and cities in the Midlands and North of England.⁴⁰⁸

On 7 September 1940, the Luftwaffe switched their focus to London and other major industrial cities. Their initial raid on London, despite the effective radar systems, caught the armed forces by surprise, with large areas of docks and warehouses in East London being destroyed during these attacks in the late afternoon and night.⁴⁰⁹ Such was the severity of these attacks that the British Government, fearing these attacks were a prelude to an invasion, issued the codeword ‘Cromwell’ to the armed forces, a codeword which was a warning that an invasion was imminent.⁴¹⁰ These assaults on London would continue for several days.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the defence put up by the RAF was even greater than both its performance at Dunkirk and the activity of the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain. Despite the limitations against them, such as a shortage of pilots and having less aircraft compared to the Luftwaffe, they were almost always able to successfully repel the invading forces. For example, despite the scale and ferocity of their attacks on 12 August, the Luftwaffe still lost 31 aircraft with the RAF losing 22 of theirs.⁴¹¹ Also, on 15 August, the Luftwaffe attacked the Northeast, believing they would meet little resistance as they thought the RAF would focus on defending attacks in the southeast.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 316.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 317.

⁴⁰⁸ Wing Commander M. P. Barley RAF (2004) “Contributing to its Own Defeat: The Luftwaffe and the Battle of Britain”, *Defence Studies*, 4:3, 402.

⁴⁰⁹ Jon Lake, *The Battle of Britain*, 117.

⁴¹⁰ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin*, 402.

⁴¹¹ Ibid, 303.

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However, they met a substantial amount of resistance before they could cause significant destruction. For their third attack on 15 August, the Luftwaffe squadron responsible would end up retreating after the RAF put up a strong defence.⁴¹² Despite these heavy raids and the amount of damage that was caused on this day, 75 Luftwaffe aircraft were lost in these operations, with a further 20 damaged, compared to the RAF's losses of 34 aircraft. This day would become known as 'Black Thursday' for Nazi Germany as the Luftwaffe lost more aircraft on this day than any other during the Battle of Britain.⁴¹³ Despite the impact on civilians and the RAF, the Luftwaffe consistently sustained higher number of casualties.

Although the number of aircraft was smaller compared to that of the Luftwaffe, the RAF made up for these shortcomings by using modern planes, namely the Hawker Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire. The Hurricane was first constructed in the mid-1930s, at the request of the Air Ministry which wanted to make use of the new Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, with the first plane taking flight in November 1935. However, the design had already become outdated by then, compared to fighter aircraft of other countries. The aircraft design was given an update and completed in April 1939. This saw many small changes being made to the design, which included wings being made of a stronger and lighter metal structure instead of being lined with fabric, like the original design. Despite the design being improved, because of the wings being thicker, the upgrade did result in the Hurricane being comparatively slower than the Spitfire and the German Messerschmitt Bf 109E. This proved problematic as speed was meant to be the main feature of fighter planes during the Second World War, so they could outrun opponents in battle.

However, this upgrade worked in the Hurricanes' favour as they proved to be a very manoeuvrable aircraft - one of the most manoeuvrable in the Battle of Britain. This was a significant advantage as it allowed Hurricanes to counter the tactics of the Messerschmitt 109E in numerous dogfights. The 109E's tactic was to reach an altitude that was higher than the enemy before diving, to give enemy aircraft a minimal chance of escaping. Hurricanes, however, were able to dive like their opponents as a countermeasure but could also roll out of dives much more easily than the 109E and escape the gun sights of the

⁴¹² Ibid, 303.

⁴¹³ Adam Claasen, *Dogfight: The Battle of Britain* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2013), 108.

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enemy. The Hurricane also had a more stable gun platform and was capable of withstanding large amounts of punishment, as German cannon shells could pass through the fabric-covered fuselage without exploding. Its relatively simple construction also allowed damaged Hurricanes to be quickly repaired and returned to service. However, even with its upgrade prior to the war, it was still faced with problems, one of them being the tendency of its wooden and fabric fuselage to catch fire more easily. Also, it had fuel tanks in the forward fuselage which could ignite if it was hit, sending a jet of flames into the cockpit, and seriously injuring the pilot. The issue was so concerning to Dowding that he ordered the fuel tanks to be retrofitted with a self-expanding rubber coating, making them less vulnerable. Despite these vulnerabilities, the Hurricane still proved to be a very effective aircraft, bearing the brunt of fighting in the Battle of Britain. It would be responsible for the destruction of more enemy aircraft in the battle than all other British fighters combined, accounting for 656 enemy aircraft.⁴¹⁴

It is the Spitfire, however, that has always been the more well-known World War Two aircraft, mainly because of the ‘Spitfire Fund’ mentioned earlier, allowing it to become a symbol of national defiance.⁴¹⁵ However, the Spitfire was initially a failure when it was first built in the late 1930s, as it was found to be too slow for a fighter aircraft and the controls were too sensitive when going at a high speed. This was rectified by the Spitfire’s designer, Reginald Joseph Mitchell, who built a second design which had much more modern design features including an undercarriage that was retractable and the same Rolls-Royce engine as the Hurricane. This second design was finished in March 1936, proving to be only marginally quicker than the Hurricane, remedied by fitting a newer wooden propeller increasing its top speed to under 350 mph. However, there would still be problems as the plane’s four guns could seize up at high altitudes and were found to be weak against large aircraft; some combat reports even claimed it could, at times, take as much as approximately 4,500 rounds to get rid of one aircraft. Fortunately, Supermarine (the company that constructed the Spitfires) designed a new aircraft cannon called the Hispano in August 1940. These new guns proved to be more reliable as, while they were still weak against enemy aircraft, they did not seize up. Despite these setbacks, the Spitfires still had advantages over the Hurricane, as they were faster, allowing them to exit battle more quickly when ammunition ran out.⁴¹⁶ Prior to this advance in gun design, the

⁴¹⁴ Patrick Bishop, *Battle of Britain: A day-to-day Chronicle*, 231.

⁴¹⁵ Dilip Sarkar, *How the Spitfire won the Battle of Britain*, 137.

⁴¹⁶ Sam Hardman, “The Mechanical Heroes of the Battle of Britain”, *The Historian* (Autumn 2011), 25.

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Spitfire was still able to play a crucial role in the Battle of Britain alongside the Hurricane. RAF Pilot Geoffrey Page explains the tactics both aircraft used when working in unison;

‘During the actual Battle of Britain itself, what really evolved was that the Hurricanes would attack the German bomber formations and the Spitfires, because of the extra capability of climbing, they would go up and attack the German fighter escorts’⁴¹⁷

This method was commonly used by both aircraft and proved to be ideal as the Spitfire was well-matched in performance with the Luftwaffe Messerschmitt Bf 109, its main adversary during the battle. Around 529 enemy aircraft would be shot down by Spitfires, whilst only losing 230 of their own.⁴¹⁸

The RAF’s performance was also boosted by the Luftwaffe being plagued with several other vulnerabilities, despite being numerically superior to the RAF. Among the Luftwaffe’s fleet was the Messerschmitt 109E which was seen as the best fighter aircraft of 1940. It was better armed than the Hurricane or Spitfire and was able to climb and dive faster than either. Despite this major advantage, these fighters were ordered to closely escort bombers, which meant they had to operate at speeds and heights that would not allow these advantages to always be put to good use.⁴¹⁹

Germany also underestimated the advancements in radar technology that were developed by the British and its importance in coordinating air defences. Although the radar installations detailed earlier were targeted, several of these attacks being successful, this did not change how important they were in allowing RAF fighters to anticipate German attacks and deflect them.⁴²⁰ There were also strategic weaknesses in the Luftwaffe, including the failure to develop a ground-to-air communication system meaning many of their aircraft were unable to plot the positions of RAF fighters. The disadvantage of Luftwaffe pilots in fighting over enemy territory quickly became apparent. With Dunkirk and the Battle of France, the Luftwaffe had the advantage of fighting over countries that had been occupied, or were being occupied, by Germany. The Battle of Britain, however, was a different situation as the RAF was fighting over foreign territory in a fight that was

⁴¹⁷ IWM: SR 11103) – Oral History: Geoffrey Page (RAF 55 Squadron).

⁴¹⁸ Dilip Sarkar, *How the Spitfire won the Battle of Britain*, 137.

⁴¹⁹ James Holland (2010) “The Battle of Britain”, *The RUSI Journal*, 155:4, 72.

⁴²⁰ Wing Commander M. P. Barley RAF (2004) “Contributing to its Own Defeat: The Luftwaffe and the Battle of Britain”, *Defence Studies*, 4:3, 406.

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mostly going in favour of their enemy. Every German aircraft that was lost over Britain would mean the loss of a pilot or entire crew; downed pilots who were able to escape their aircraft would subsequently become prisoners of war, depleting the Luftwaffe of qualified pilots.⁴²¹ This would be different, however, for the RAF as a pilot could bail out by parachute and re-join his squadron, likely being back in action within a matter of hours.

While many of the Luftwaffe's pilots had great battle experience, they lacked the same effective aircraft the RAF possessed, accurate military intelligence and the training to wage an effective strategic air war.⁴²² Widespread as their attacks were, it did result in their targets being more scattered, which would have made them vulnerable to RAF aircraft. In September 1940, they put themselves at a disadvantage when focusing on London. For many of its squadrons, their new target was at a greater distance to previous targets, which began affecting their performance. This was especially the case with the Luftwaffe Bf109 fighter escorts, who were present to provide cover for German bombers. They would only have enough fuel for 10 minutes of combat over England, which stretched them to their limit.⁴²³ Although these factors did not stop the Luftwaffe from carrying out destructive and widespread attacks, they would hamper their performance to the point where it soon became apparent that the RAF could not be defeated.

The RAF's actions during the Battle of Britain were helped by having an effective radar system developed by Lord Hugh Dowding, which used the latest science and technology to detect hostile aircraft and co-ordinate how air defences would respond.⁴²⁴ This system consisted of dozens of radar stations, which had been constructed along the British coastline. Those who manned these stations were able to detect any approaching German aircraft from as far as 80 miles away.⁴²⁵ The information that was gathered by radar and Observer Corps went to the RAF Fighter Command Headquarters at Bentley Priory in North London. Information was checked

⁴²¹ James Holland (2010) "*The Battle of Britain*", *The RUSI Journal*, 155:4, 74.

⁴²² Wing Commander M. P. Barley RAF (2004) "Contributing to its Own Defeat: The Luftwaffe and the Battle of Britain", *Defence Studies*, 4:3, 402.

⁴²³ Phillip Kaplan, *The Battle of Britain: Luftwaffe Blitz*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Aviation, 2013), 166.

⁴²⁴ Anthony J. Cumming (2007) "Did Radar Win the Battle of Britain?", *The Historian*, 69:4, 695.

⁴²⁵ TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch – Despatch by Lord Hugh Dowding, August 1941.

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and circulated by phone to RAF groups across the country.⁴²⁶ Known as the ‘Dowding System’, it would become the world’s most advanced air defence network during this period of the war. However, it was not always effective. As mentioned earlier, the system’s warning stations would become targets for the Luftwaffe once they started targeting airfields and radar stations to cripple the RAF. If they were damaged in these attacks, they could be left out of action for some time, potentially making it difficult to detect oncoming Luftwaffe raids. A good example of this is the radar station at Ventnor which suffered serious damage to the extent where it was out of use until 23 August 1940.⁴²⁷ Even without being damaged, accurate readings were not always possible; if the elevation of aircraft flying was not between 5,000 and 25,000, then a very inaccurate height reading could be given.⁴²⁸ Furthermore, it would not always be possible for aircraft to stand at ‘readiness’, as refuelling and rearming could be time-consuming, especially with exhausted ground personnel, meaning direct responses to radar detecting bombing raids were not always possible.⁴²⁹ However, this did not stop the system from being a vital component in the Battle. It is likely that lessons were learned from Operation Dynamo, as the radar used by the RAF appeared to have been ineffective. This made it difficult to predict the situation at Dunkirk, leading to aircraft not always being able to be deployed at crucial moments. As these were problems the Dowding System rectified, it is likely they could have been a reason for this radar system being developed.

On the culmination of the significant fighting, on 15 September 1940, although the RAF lost 40 aircraft on this day, they downed 56 Luftwaffe aircraft in two dogfights, lasting two hours each. It was their actions on this day that convinced Goering and the German High Command that the Luftwaffe would not be able to achieve air supremacy over Britain. On 17 September 1940, because of this, Hitler postponed his plans to invade Britain and decided to divert his attention to preparing for a potential invasion of the Soviet Union. It is believed that between 10 July and the end of October 1940

⁴²⁶ Anthony J. Cumming (2007) “Did Radar Win the Battle of Britain?”, *The Historian*, 69:4, 691.

⁴²⁷ Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, *The Narrow Margin*, 320.

⁴²⁸ Anthony J. Cumming (2007) “Did Radar Win the Battle of Britain?”, *The Historian*, 69:4, 696.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid*, 692.

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that the RAF lost approx. 667 aircraft⁴³⁰ and 537 airmen were killed.⁴³¹ However, the Luftwaffe lost 2,375 aircraft⁴³² with 2,662 aircrews being killed or missing.⁴³³

Although the RAF had proved a formidable enemy to the Luftwaffe by September 1940, this was not the end of enemy aircraft action. In October 1940, Hitler ordered a massive bombing campaign against London and other cities to crush British morale and force Britain into an armistice. Although there was much material damage and loss of life, Britain's resolve remained unbroken throughout. In May 1941, these air raids eventually ceased as the German forces began massing near the USSR border in preparation for an invasion.

While Britain was arguably the victor of the Battle of Britain, as strongly indicated by evidence in this chapter, the extent to which it can be considered a victory remains a source of debate. 'The Luftwaffe had been unable to achieve the air supremacy required for an invasion and admittedly failed to crush its enemy' says historian Jon Lake, '[but] at the same time the RAF had similarly failed to destroy the Luftwaffe and was unable to win complete control of its own airspace.'⁴³⁴ Richard Overy has also argued 'the German threat was only partially reduced as a result of the air battles... the one thing the Battle of Britain could not prevent was the bombing. Even during the daylight clashes between July and September, a high proportion of bombers reached and bombed their targets.'⁴³⁵

The Luftwaffe was even more relentless than it had been at Dunkirk, with widespread attacks that would often prove effective, even with several limitations working against them. The Luftwaffe's limitations would not entirely hamper their actions, as this chapter has detailed. Although they were eventually driven back during the final phase of the Battle, the same Luftwaffe that had overwhelmed the RAF in the Battle of

⁴³⁰ TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch – Report on experience of Fighter Operations in this Defensive.

⁴³¹ Mitch Peeke, *1940: The Battles to stop Hitler* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2015), 162.

⁴³² TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch – Report on experience of Fighter Operations in this Defensive.

⁴³³ Mitch Peeke, *The Battles to stop Hitler*, 162.

⁴³⁴ Jon Lake, *Battle of Britain*, 142.

⁴³⁵ Richard Overy, *The Battle of Britain: Myths and Reality* (London: Penguin Publishing, 2010), 83.

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France, had taken every opportunity to hamper the Dunkirk evacuation and did everything to try to gain air superiority in Britain, was still in operation.

Myth and the Battle of Britain

As well as being the ‘next phase’ of Hitler’s invasion of Europe and having much RAF involvement like Dunkirk, what the Battle of Britain also has in common with Dunkirk is how they are both part of the ‘myth of 1940’. Both also followed in the footsteps of previous myth and legend, as Angus Calder notes ‘like the Armada when ‘God blew and they were scattered’, the bloodless miracle of the Glorious Revolution, or the providential triumph of Trafalgar, these were events in which the hand of destiny was seen.’⁴³⁶ Like the Dunkirk evacuation, the Battle of Britain fit the pre-existing mythology framework that had existed for years of Britain facing off against seemingly unbeatable odds. Following success after success for several years in mainland Europe, Nazi Germany had set its sights on Britain and were drawing up plans for an invasion. Preparations for such an invasion were already taking place with the Luftwaffe attacking British shipping and carrying out bombing raids against Britain. Despite the best efforts of the German forces, the RAF was able to successfully combat the Luftwaffe, eventually driving them back. Britain was the victor of the Battle of Britain, giving Nazi Germany its first defeat.

Despite this, the extent to which it was a victory is unclear as even after the Battle of Britain finished in October 1940, Luftwaffe attacks continued through to May 1941, a period which would become known as ‘The Blitz’. This proves contradictory to the ‘narrative’ of the Battle as although it officially ended in October 1940, the conflict relating to the battle did not really end as the Luftwaffe continued their assault. Even when this period ended, Germany was starting to draw up plans for an invasion of the Soviet Union and was mobilizing much of its armed forces for this, so diverted the attention away from Britain. Had these plans for an invasion of Russia not been drawn up, there is the possibility that another invasion plan for Britain could have been drawn up, one that may even have had success. However, the fact does remain that Germany had failed to ultimately conquer Britain, the first time it had failed to invade a country, despite a sliver of success as they had conquered the British Channel Islands. Unlike

⁴³⁶ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico Books, 1992), 16.

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Dunkirk where the narrative's interpretation of being a victory for Britain is misguided, the 'narrative' formed by mythology for the Battle of Britain having the battle be a victory of Britain is accurate to a certain extent; the conflict was not over but Germany failed to conquer Britain.

Mythology has also tied Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain together even further, forming a narrative. British forces were cornered by the seemingly unbeatable German forces at Dunkirk but managed to escape their clutches and return to Britain, ensuring a victory of sorts for Britain as its army had remained intact. Although now alone as mainland Europe had been occupied by Germany, Britain would then score another, much stronger victory against the German forces when they attacked and tried to invade Britain. Mark Connelly makes this interesting point regarding both events being intertwined;

'The myth of Dunkirk and the 'Dunkirk Spirit' have become vital to our self-perceptions, for they underline and confirm our sense of apartness, of otherness, of self-reliance and insularity, of coolness under tremendous pressure, of surviving against the odds. These concepts of separation and of unique qualities were not invented in 1940: rather, it was their next incarnation in a long-standing national saga. A distinctive, contemporary experience was then grafted into an established national myth. This sense of being alone saw its ultimate distillation in the Battle of Britain, when the fewest of the few defeated an enemy that appeared to have uncontested superiority... To this day we find it hard to escape the compelling attraction of the time when Britain stood alone and defiant'⁴³⁷

Britain was 'alone' for both events, with the loss of France, a valuable ally, and with mainland Europe under Nazi occupation. However, they still managed to gain a victory against this same enemy. This was the same formula for stories and legends previously mythologised; being alone against seemingly unbeatable odds, yet still managing to emerge victorious. 'On the simple level, both moments were ones of genuine national

⁴³⁷ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 54-55.

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emergency' Connelly also adds, 'but both crises also appealed, then and now, to a deeply-held sense of history, destiny and culture.'⁴³⁸

Unlike the myth of Dunkirk, the RAF formed an important part of the Battle of Britain myth. As Angus Calder notes, 'the myth of the Battle of Britain is very different from that of the myth of Dunkirk, or the myth of the Blitz. Representations of the Battle of Britain rest on a heroization of the elite fighter pilots rather than the mass of Britons, encapsulated in Churchill's paeon to 'the few.'⁴³⁹ An integral part of the myth is the heroic actions of the RAF against the invading Luftwaffe. Though the RAF was the arguable victor of the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe's defeat was not entirely down to the actions of the RAF. As detailed earlier, the RAF was at a disadvantage. Unlike Operation Dynamo when they had a comparatively small area to cover, with the Battle of Britain they had much more ground to cover, as various areas of Britain were targets, which meant more fuel consumption. There is also the fact they were operating within unfamiliar territory and not carrying out operations over a country where Nazi occupation was underway. These gave the RAF a strong advantage during the Battle of Britain.

As with Dunkirk, the press and the Ministry of Information were still determined to report on the battle in a very positive light. Not only did they focus on the positive outcomes, but also exaggerated facts.⁴⁴⁰ This time it was the role of the RAF, or 'The Few' as they would become known, that would be the focus of such reporting. There was clearly an effort being made to portray the RAF in a heroic light, with their attacks on the Luftwaffe being reported daily to the public. For example, on 8 August 1940, the BBC reported the Air Ministry had claimed sixty Luftwaffe kills for the loss of twenty British fighters, while the Luftwaffe claimed 49 kills for the loss of 31.⁴⁴¹ However, as touched upon in Chapter Three, estimating first-hand the number of enemy aircraft lost would have been a difficult task, which means some overestimating and underestimating would have happened regardless of any media bias.

⁴³⁸ Ibid, 55-56.

⁴³⁹ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, 56.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, 63.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 63.

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It is also through Churchill's rhetoric that made the RAF, or 'The Few' as coined by Churchill, a crucial part of this myth. Most notably, he is known to have said, in a speech to the House of Commons;

'Undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger [they were] turning the tide of the world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'⁴⁴²

Churchill's public speeches and rhetoric have become iconic aspects of the Second World War in Britain, as Mark Connelly describes 'Churchill's speeches became the way in which the British like to remember 1940, and indeed the whole war; the history and nature of the experience was connected to his oratory.'⁴⁴³ Churchill's speeches were seen as a source of inspiration for the British people and therefore had some responsibility for the mythologisation of certain aspects of the Second World War. This includes the heroics of 'the Few'. As well as Churchill's rhetoric and speech, there was also an attempt by the Press to romanticise 'the Few', portraying them in a much more heroic light. Malcolm Smith gives an excellent example of this;

'Cinema newsreels were not quite so immediate in their impact as radio, of course, but they could be produced within three or four days. For obvious reasons, much of the aerial footage which the newsreels used in 1940 was from the archives. They tended to concentrate on the happy camaraderie of young men on the ground, smoking their pipes, petting their dogs and playing cricket in full flying kit waiting to scramble, or returning to give their reports of the hunt. It was clearly difficult to resist the sporting and chivalric metaphor when dealing with this new breed of hero, the fighter pilot, the new knight errant of a technological age. Their individualism, the control of an awesomely fast, extraordinarily manoeuvrable machine, the way they drew vapour trails across the sky as they dived in to attack the plodding, methodical banks of bombers appeared to reinvest warfare with some sense of grace.'⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² TNA: CAB 21/118 – Registered Files of the War Office Committee.

⁴⁴³ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, Page 124.

⁴⁴⁴ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940, History, Myth and Popular Memory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 64-65.

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However, the reality was very different from what was being portrayed in these newsreels and other media at the time;

‘There was no hint in the newsreels of the cacophony of the fighter’s war, the brain-numbing sound of engine manifolds at ear height on either side of the cramped cockpit, no hint of the frustration of so often failing to find the enemy or, on finding him, having the guns jam after a couple of seconds.’⁴⁴⁵

While the Ministry of Information and the Press had made every effort to portray Operation Dynamo as being more successful than it was, it still would have been no secret that it was very much a retreat and Germany now had control of mainland Europe. The exaggeration of success during the Battle of Britain and this effort to heroicise the RAF as much as possible could have been a way of compensating the hasty retreat at Dunkirk. To achieve this, there would have been a determined effort to give the impression of Britain managing to hold its own against Germany; a country which had been dominating mainland Europe over the last few years, enjoying success after success. Like Dunkirk, this fit the framework in pre-existing mythology; standing alone against a powerful enemy yet still managing to come out on top despite all odds. The heroization of the RAF, as demonstrated by Malcolm Smith’s point, was the primary method used to achieve this. Like the bravery of the BEF and Little Ships of Dunkirk in May and June 1940, this image fabricated by myth became part of the ‘narrative’ for the Battle of Britain, as Mark Connelly describes;

‘The history of the defeat of foreign enemies allowed the English to believe they had a special relationship with God; it made them the chosen people. In turn, this made the fighter pilots the cream of the British. The nation has accepted that image ever since 1940. As Britons we know that fighter pilots were young gods leading carefree lives who positively enjoyed giving the Luftwaffe a richly deserved thrashing. Since the Second World War our popular culture has reinforced this knowledge again and again, often in the most oblique ways.’⁴⁴⁶

Evidently, the myth that has endured regarding the Battle of Britain is how Britain came under threat from Germany in the Summer of 1940, standing alone after

⁴⁴⁵ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940, History, Myth and Popular Memory*, 66.

⁴⁴⁶ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, 96.

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Germany occupied mainland Europe, but was fought off valiantly by ‘the Few’. While this narrative is by no means wholly inaccurate as Germany had set its sights on Britain following its conquest of north-west Europe and Britain was the arguable victor of the Battle of Britain, with the RAF playing a large part in this, the power of myth to form narratives which find their way into popular memory was demonstrated once more.

Conclusion

Evidently, the RAF’s heroics during the Battle of Britain and Britain’s arguable ‘victory’ at the battle have been overemphasised through the myth of 1940. The Luftwaffe faced limitations which gave them vulnerability, attempts were likely made to compensate for the BEF’s hasty retreat and the Blitz, which in some ways was a continuation, was to come after the battle, continuing until May 1941.

Despite this, the significance of the success Britain and the RAF had during the battle is not something to be overlooked. ‘In the summer of 1940, Germany faced Britain and France, and had to defeat both’ says James Holland; ‘...this was the gamble Hitler took. He beat France, but he did not beat Britain, and at the end of the summer Germany was significantly worse off than she had been in May, and facing a long, attritional war on two fronts, which was precisely what the Fuhrer had so desperately wished to avoid.’⁴⁴⁷ Patrick Bishop adds to this, stating, ‘Britain lived on in freedom to provide a base for the heavy bomber offensive against Germany and, eventually, a launch pad for the Allied invasion of Europe. The Luftwaffe, which had terrorized Europe, had been humbled. Hitler had suffered his first defeat.’⁴⁴⁸ Sam Hardman even states that ‘the Battle of Britain is often described as the point at which the Nazi threat began to diminish and cracks began to form in Hitler’s regime’.⁴⁴⁹ It was the first real defeat Nazi Germany had suffered in its quest to dominate Europe, having successfully invaded and occupied much of mainland Europe. This failure is made further significant by how it happened only a few months after the Blitzkrieg had been launched, occupying Holland, Belgium and France in a short period of time, and

⁴⁴⁷ James Holland, *The Battle of Britain: Five Months Which Changed History*, (London: Bantam Press, 2010), 844.

⁴⁴⁸ Patrick Bishop, *Battle of Britain: A day-by-day account*, 230.

⁴⁴⁹ Sam Hardman, “The Mechanical Heroes of the Battle of Britain”, *The Historian* (Autumn 2011), 25.

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triggering a mass evacuation of British forces from Dunkirk. Even if the Luftwaffe and Nazi Germany did not cease actions after it ended, the Battle of Britain still denied Germany a victory.

Evidently, Britain had the upper hand during the battle and emerged victorious, despite the Luftwaffe still being active and it being several years before Nazi Germany was toppled. Like the Dunkirk evacuations, the RAF's success at the Battle of Britain did not happen by chance. The Luftwaffe, though their forces outnumbered the RAF throughout, were at a disadvantage. Destructive as their attacks were, they were more widespread than at Dunkirk. While this can sound like something that worked in the Luftwaffe's favour, and in some ways it was, this was a disadvantage in the long run. It rendered the Luftwaffe more vulnerable to British counterattacks and prevented their aircraft from being completely effective. The Luftwaffe would be more likely to lose aircraft and crews, as they were operating over territory that was separate to mainland Europe and not in the stages of being occupied – perhaps the most significant disadvantage the Battle of Britain presented for them. However, the Luftwaffe's weaknesses are by no means the only reason why the RAF was successful in the Battle of Britain. The RAF was aided by an effective radar system, a system the Luftwaffe did not possess. It detected approaching German aircraft from long distances, alerting the RAF of their approach and allowing many Luftwaffe attacks to be countered by the RAF and for tactics to be planned. It has even been praised in an official report by the Air Ministry as being the catalyst for victory, claiming 'without it we should not have prevailed'.⁴⁵⁰ From these descriptions, this system can sound like the reason for the RAF's victory. However, effective as the Dowding System was, this victory would not have been made possible had the RAF's performance not been as exceptional as it was. As with Dunkirk, they were faced with limitations, namely being short of pilots and aircraft at times, but clearly, these were not enough to hamper their actions. As explicated in this chapter, it is evident that the RAF's strength during the Battle of Britain lay in their tactics and aircraft available to them. This gave them the ability to outmanoeuvre much of the Luftwaffe's aircraft, giving them the upper hand during

⁴⁵⁰ TNA: AIR 20/2502 – Air Ministry and Ministry of Defence: Papers accumulated by the Air Historical Branch.

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many dogfights. The Luftwaffe casualties during the battle were generally higher than those of the RAF.

However, things could have been very different had Dowding not had his concerns about the potential depletion of RAF aircraft back in May 1940 and choosing to send fewer aircraft to France. His dismissing such concerns and sending full RAF cover to France would have likely worked in the Allies' favour. But the extent to how this would have helped is not certain. Likely though it may have been to have dealt more damage to the German ground forces and the Luftwaffe, it would have been unlikely to put a stop to the Blitzkrieg and turn the tide for the BEF, thus negating a mass evacuation of Allied forces from Dunkirk. Furthermore, sending more RAF aircraft would not have changed the Luftwaffe's relentlessness. The Luftwaffe could have been dealt more damage, but more RAF could have been lost at the same time. The same can be said about the cutbacks made to RAF activity during Operation Dynamo. While the RAF was at a disadvantage and faced comparatively more obstacles than the RAF, they were still a significant threat during the Battle of Britain. Though the RAF had an exceptional radar system, it would have been almost meaningless had they had limited resources to respond to the radar's detection. While the RAF performed admirably and allowed the Battle of Britain to be a victory because of this, they were only able to be successful because of having significant resources available to them. During the Battle of France, the RAF lost many aircraft and crews. While being successful at Operation Dynamo, they were still faced with disadvantages during Operation Dynamo that affected their performance. Had cutbacks on flying times and aircraft being sent over to Dunkirk not been made, many more aircraft could have been lost to the RAF.

Relentless attacks were carried out by the Luftwaffe against the evacuation proceedings. While sending more aircraft over would have countered several of these more effectively, it would have very likely resulted in greater aircraft casualties for the RAF. This would have put the RAF at an even greater disadvantage for the Battle of Britain, especially as there was a shortage of available aircraft and crews at one point and the RAF could not always be able to meet its targeted output of available aircraft. They may not have even been able to be as successful as they ended up being. Overall, Dowding's decision not to send large numbers of RAF aircraft over to France had ultimately paid off, as hindering as it may have been for Dunkirk and the Battle of

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France, it proved to have been a wise decision in the end. Had he gone against his judgement and sent large numbers during the Battle of France and Operation Dynamo, his concerns of the RAF's forces being depleted are likely to have come true.

Though the odds appeared to be stacked against Britain, as the BEF had suffered a major defeat in mainland Europe which was now occupied by Germany and appeared to be closing in, the Battle of Britain was a victory – one that the performance of the RAF and, ostensibly, Dowding's reservations at the Battle of France, had made possible.

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Appendix – Chapter Four

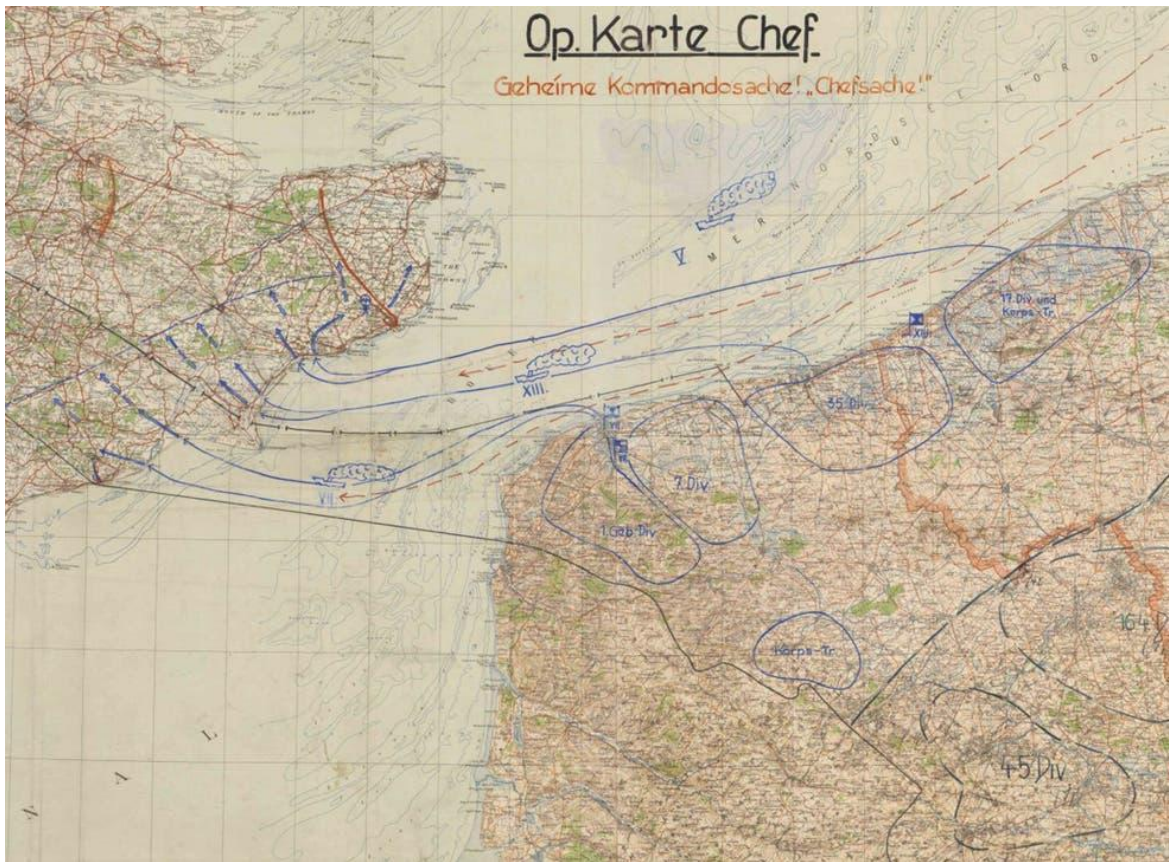


Fig. 1 – Operational Sea Lion map (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/operation-sea-lion-hitler-s-plan-to-invade-britain-marked-with-publication-of-nazi-war-charts-10506604.html>)

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Conclusion

The primary aim of this thesis has been to explore how significant the role of the RAF to Dunkirk while examining the myth of 1940 and how it formed a story around Dunkirk, a story which gives the RAF little to no focus. To examine this as effectively as possible, much quantitative and qualitative data regarding the evacuation has been collected; from published books to varied testimony and official documents once held by the War Office and the Air Ministry which are now in the possession of the National Archives. As well as the RAF's role at Dunkirk and the myth of 1940, examining the extent of Operation Dynamo's success, criticisms made against the RAF at Dunkirk and the actions of the RAF in the Battle of Britain proved to be just as crucial for answering the project's key research question.

Whether or not Dunkirk can be perceived as a successful operation and even though its success has been exaggerated through myth, it remains an iconic and unique event of the Second World War in Europe. The way everyone involved at Dunkirk, from the BEF troops to the brave civilians manning the Little Ships of Dunkirk, pulled together to rescue the BEF was seen as such a remarkable feat. This quotation from a New York Times Article, dated 30 November 1972, sums up the significance of the civilians' efforts in the rescue and how it has made Dunkirk the iconic event that it is:

'So long as the English tongue survives, the word Dunkirk will be spoken with reverence. For in that harbour, in such a hell as never blazed on earth before, at the end of a lost battle, the rags and blemishes that have hidden the soul of democracy fell away. There, beaten but unconquered, in shining splendour, she faced the enemy. They sent away the wounded first. Men died so that others could escape. It was not so simple a thing as courage, which the Nazis had in plenty. It was not so simply a thing as discipline, which can be hammered into men by a drill sergeant. It was not the result of careful planning for there could have been little. It was the common man of the free countries, rising in his glory out of mill, office, factory, mine, farm and ship, applying to war the lessons he learned when he went down the shaft to bring out trapped comrades, when he hurled the lifeboat through the surf, when he endured poverty and hard work for his children's sake. This shining

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thing in the souls of free men Hitler cannot command, or attain, or conquer. He has crushed it, where he could, from German hearts. It is the great tradition of democracy. It is the future. It is victory'.⁴⁵¹

From the 'narrative' that was formed for Operation Dynamo by myth, the saying 'Dunkirk Spirit' emerged. This is something that has become a common term, used over the decades to describe instances of people 'pulling together in a crisis'. Furthermore, the legacy of Dunkirk has been kept alive through numerous methods, including the production of films and TV programmes telling the story of the Dunkirk evacuation visually, ensuring that this significant event of the Second World War is remembered for generations to come.

Key people had critical decisions to make at Dunkirk. Lord Hugh Dowding had refused to send further fighter protection during the Battle of France, being worried about conserving the air fleet during the evacuation. Despite this move likely proving a hindrance during the battle, the decision was implemented for good reason, to build up better fighter defences for Britain later in the war. This worked to Britain's advantage, especially during the Battle of Britain from July to October 1940. Winston Churchill, while famously noting 'wars are not won through evacuations', clearly held the Dunkirk evacuation and the role of the RAF in very high regard. He believed what had initially been, in his words, a 'colossal military disaster'⁴⁵² turned into a 'miracle of deliverance,'⁴⁵³ all within a relatively short time. In a speech to the House of Commons on 4 June 1940, he described how '[Dunkirk was] a miracle of deliverance, achieved by valour, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all. The enemy was hurled back by the retreating British and French troops. He [the enemy] was so roughly handled that he did not harry their departure seriously.'⁴⁵⁴ While he did not view Dunkirk as being a 'victory', it is clear from this that he viewed it as being an 'achievement'. Opinions among historians have differed on Dunkirk, but the research that has been carried out

⁴⁵¹ New York Times: Unswerving Idealist (30 November 1972) - <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/11/30/archives/unswerving-idealist.html>.

⁴⁵² CAB 21/118 – Registered Files of the War Office Committee.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

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for this thesis has shown that there is a consensus that Dunkirk was a successful operation to a certain extent, as indicated in the literature review.

Despite its successes and being elevated by the myth of 1940, Operation Dynamo only became necessary because of the BEF's defeat in northern France, being part of their 'fighting retreat' from the German Blitzkrieg. While much of the BEF was saved and remained intact, the Blitzkrieg had been a resounding success, much valuable army equipment was lost and Britain would lose France, a valuable ally. Despite the impressive numbers rescued in a relatively short time, not all the BEF could be retrieved; many were left behind and captured. Despite all this, Operation Dynamo has been held in very high regard in Britain, being mythologised due to propaganda as being more successful than it really was. This was not the case for France, with the ends of the evacuation not being viewed as favourably. In the words of General Weygand of the French Army, it was 'certainly not a victory' but 'the least unfortunate resolution of what could have been a catastrophe.'⁴⁵⁵ For Britain, Dynamo had ended with the BEF being rescued, being able to maintain its armed forces, for France it ended with the final stages of Germany's invasion of France, leading to the rise of the Vichy Government very soon after.

Although the Dunkirk myth has portrayed it as being more triumphant than it actually was, Dunkirk was still a successful operation overall. All four components of the evacuation (troops being rescued, the Navy, the Little Ships of Dunkirk and the RAF) all pulled together to make the evacuation happen. As a result, there was no significant disruption caused to the evacuation, relentless as the enemy was with its attempts to disrupt it. The most significant evidence for this is how many more troops were rescued than had been anticipated during the evacuation's planning stages. The planning had estimated only 30,000 to 50,000 troops would be evacuated, but the actual total ended up being much higher, at 338,000. The British Army remained intact because of this, allowing for further Allied victories later in the war, most significantly the Normandy Landings of 1944, the event that was arguably the catalyst for Allied victory in Western Europe. It can even be argued that, because of the success of the Normandy Landings potentially being possible because of Britain having strong armed

⁴⁵⁵ Harry Raffal, *Air Power and the Evacuation of Dunkirk* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 2.

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forces, the successful evacuation from Dunkirk could maybe be perceived as ‘the true Allied victory’.

Operation Dynamo could even be regarded as a turning point of the war in Western Europe. The German Blitzkrieg was launched so suddenly on 10 May 1940, catching the BEF and Allies off-guard. The events following this could have gone either way. The BEF could have eventually been cornered by the German forces and captured, leaving Britain without a strong army. The planners of Operation Dynamo underestimated the number of troops that would be evacuated, which implies the hopelessness of the situation from their point of view. This hopelessness started disappearing in a matter of days, with the daily number of evacuations quadrupling over a three-day period. This better-than-anticipated deliverance, which helped conserve the British Army, eventually led to the 1944 Normandy Landings being successful. However, while it seems fair to conclude the sheer numbers of those evacuated from the beaches helped conserve the British Army, the exact number of Battalions lifted from Dunkirk that went back into active service, and what conflicts they went to next, remains unclear. There appears to be no concrete answer as to exactly how the outcome of Dunkirk really impacted the rest of the Second World War. Perhaps this subject can be researched and discovered in the future.

From the evidence gathered throughout the project, it is clear the RAF was vital to the success of Operation Dynamo. It maintained an almost-continuous cover of Dunkirk and its surrounding areas. They also dealt significant damage to the Luftwaffe, despite the latter arguably being much stronger in terms of numbers and formations. Luftwaffe attacks still happened, some proving to be more devastating than others as was the case on 29 May and 1 June 1940, which saw many ships involved in the evacuation damaged or sunk. However, due to the RAF’s continuous involvement, there were fewer attacks than there could have been. The RAF continued playing a significant role in the Second World War, namely the Battle of Britain from 10 July until 31 October 1940. The RAF’s successful actions were arguably made possible through Lord Dowding’s controversial decision to not send RAF reinforcements to France in May 1940. While there was no way of telling exactly how the rest of the war would play out for Britain at that stage, and things would have looked bleak for its armed forces given

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the situation with the Blitzkrieg in mainland Europe, this decision ultimately became a wise one in the long run.

From the findings presented in this thesis, it can be concluded that the RAF was very crucial to Operation Dynamo, to the point where they were arguably the main reason for the evacuation having success. They were tasked with protecting the evacuation process from the Luftwaffe; the most significant threat the evacuation faced.

Successful as Operation Dynamo arguably was, it by no means went smoothly, with constant bombardments from the Luftwaffe, determined to impede the evacuation any way it could. These attacks saw many ships damaged or lost, rendered some evacuation routes unusable and even forced the evacuation's final stages to take place at night, following heavy attacks on 1 June 1940. Although enemy shelling and batteries had some responsibility, the Luftwaffe was the primary culprit of these setbacks. As important as the Royal Navy and the Little Ships of Dunkirk evidently were, they too were constantly at the mercy of the Luftwaffe and, as tables in Chapter 3 indicate, suffered from these bombardments. Although the RAF would by no means be invulnerable to the Luftwaffe either, they were responsible for the evacuation's defence and, as the numbers evacuated are any indication, were successful in the long run. Had the RAF not been able to effectively defend the evacuation process from them, it is almost certain the Luftwaffe would have impeded the operation even more severely. It could even have prevented Operation Dynamo from being successful, perhaps even cutting the evacuation drastically short.

What has also been very important to this thesis is examining the power myth has to shape memories and perceptions of certain events. This is what happened with the Dunkirk evacuations. Though it was only necessary because of the BEF's defeat in mainland Europe, it has been remembered much more as a 'triumphant victory' than the product of defeat that it was. Myth also has the power to cause certain elements to be at the forefront of memory and other elements to have comparatively little focus. Through biased and inaccurate reporting at the time and pre-existing framework for mythology being in place long before Dunkirk, a 'narrative' was formed about Dunkirk which persisted through the decades – the BEF were stranded at Dunkirk, facing unbeatable odds, yet still held out and were rescued by a flotilla of civilian vessels, with both sides working together to overcome these odds, Dunkirk being a

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‘triumph’ as a result. The Little Ships of Dunkirk and the bravery of the stranded troops both became the core elements of the story.

The RAF, on the other hand, was not celebrated as much. Though it was occasionally included in newspaper reports and were even praised by Churchill, meaning their activity would have certainly been public knowledge, the RAF did not become a core element of this ‘narrative’. Though the iconic status the BEF’s resilience during the crisis and the Little Ships of Dunkirk gained is well deserved, it was the RAF that was much more crucial to the success of Operation Dynamo. It was tasked with stopping the Luftwaffe from disrupting the evacuation, the most significant threat to Operation Dynamo, with the BEF and Little Ships of Dunkirk being at their mercy. Had the RAF not been present to protect the evacuation, the outcome of Operation Dynamo would have been different and would not have been celebrated as the ‘success’ it has been regarded as.

The biggest contribution to making this conclusion is how much of the data collected from the National Archives correlate with each other and give clear indications of a heavy RAF presence at and around Dunkirk. Although there is some doubt about the accuracy of a small amount of this data, as the accuracy of Table 1 in Chapter Three (Statistics for RAF Fighter Group 11) is questionable, it is likely to be the most accurate data as they are from official documents that were being written during or just after the events of Dynamo. There is a clear indication of the Luftwaffe being the most significant threat to the Dunkirk Evacuation Dynamo, the RAF was not always able to provide cover over the beaches all of the time and this was something the Luftwaffe clearly took advantage of. Particularly heavy assaults by the Luftwaffe was carried out on 29 May and 1 June, Table 1 in Chapter Three, although not representative of the entirety of the RAF, shows there was a smaller number of patrols flown on these days compared to previous days of the evacuation. Correlation also exists between the figures of Luftwaffe casualties by the Royal Navy and the number of evacuated troop casualties. According to Table 3 in Chapter Three, the Royal Navy shot down 13 Luftwaffe craft, the highest during the evacuation, with the highest number of troop casualties being evacuated on 29 May and 1 June: 1,507 and 2,022 respectively. There is also the indication from official reports that suggest communication between the

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Navy and the RAF was poor, with one such document being outright critical of their performance.

While this could sound like an indication that the RAF was insufficient, the very same data indicates this was far from the case, it gives clear evidence of a heavy RAF presence for much of the time and indicates they were often able to fend off the Luftwaffe, which was the biggest danger faced by the evacuation. Table 3 from Chapter 3 shows the total number of troops evacuated increased from 27 May to 1 June, doing so rapidly for the first few days: 4,578 on 27 May and 59,797 on 31 May. The same table also shows that the number of troops in fit condition was always much higher than the number of those who were casualties. Furthermore, while patrol numbers were low on some days, the number of flying hours were still very high. The numbers of Luftwaffe craft shot down, at least by 11 Group, peaked on 29 May and 1 June, implying there was still a strong RAF presence at and around Dunkirk on those days, despite Luftwaffe onslaughts suggesting otherwise. It also implies RAF absences were likely to have been comparatively scarce, even if those moments were taken full advantage of by the Luftwaffe, which is an indication that they were able to prevent more Luftwaffe attacks from happening, albeit not all, made evident from the figures of evacuated troops often being high and the figures for troops in fit condition being high. With the troop casualty figures particularly high on both days the Luftwaffe carried out their most devastating attacks, it is clear the Luftwaffe was the 'deciding factor' for the success of Dunkirk, more frequent attacks could have aborted the evacuation altogether had they been given much freer reign. This in turn also made the RAF a deciding factor, as it was tasked with defending the BEF, the Navy and the Little Ships of Dunkirk and preventing the other 'deciding factor' that was the Luftwaffe from causing significant disruption. Significant though the Navy and Little Ships evidently were, they did not have the power to determine the outcome of Dynamo like the RAF and Luftwaffe did.

Overall, despite the odds against them, mythology obscuring their role in the 'narrative' of Dunkirk and being on the receiving end of an unjust amount of criticism, it is evident that the RAF was not only crucial to the Dunkirk evacuation of May 1940, but they were also the most significant component of the evacuation. They dealt with the most significant threat to the evacuation, the Luftwaffe, which went out of its way

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to disrupt the evacuation any way they could. Persistent as it was in its efforts, the Luftwaffe failed to disrupt Operation Dynamo in any significant way. It was the RAF which contributed to the larger-than-predicted number of troops that were evacuated, as evidence presented in this thesis indicates. Despite Winston Churchill famously regarding Dunkirk as not being an actual victory, even he was known to have said ‘there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted, it was by the Air Force,’⁴⁵⁶ believing the RAF were victorious in their activity at Dunkirk. Evidence also shows that the Luftwaffe was responsible for much destruction during the sparse moments of RAF absence, a clear indication of how easily they could have halted Operation Dynamo if they were unopposed. Had the RAF not been as active as they evidently were, as evidence collected clearly shows, it is likely the number of evacuated troops could have been much smaller, and Operation Dynamo could have even been ended prematurely. While it is evidently the product of a defeat after the BEF’s defeat in Belgium and France, despite the myth of 1940 portraying it as more of a triumph than it was, this defeat could have been much worse had Operation Dynamo not succeeded. It may not even have become the success story, or ‘miracle of deliverance’ as coined by some, it has become in popular memory. Any remembrance of the event would have been in an unfavourable light, with the term ‘Dunkirk Spirit’ not even existing and not being mythologised as a ‘triumphant victory’. However, even if much of this success was exaggerated in popular memory, the Dunkirk evacuation of May 1940 was still a successful operation overall. The RAF was the most important reason for this success, being able to effectively protect the soldiers awaiting rescue and the boats rescuing them from the significant threat of the Luftwaffe. The RAF allowed the evacuation of the BEF, Operation Dynamo, to become a successful operation that emerged from a catastrophic military defeat.

⁴⁵⁶ CAB 21/118 – Registered Files of the War Office Committee.

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